

Written by  
Isshiki Ichika  
Illustrated by fame

# BERSERK

## OF GLUTTONY

NOVEL

I

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*"It's the lich! The Corpse!  
Everyone get out of here!"*

The cry came from a rugged, tough-looking adventurer, who turned pale white and fled upon seeing my skull mask.

People had recently taken to calling me the Corpse, likely on account of how I was most often spotted alone on a mountain of goblin corpses.



“Uh...Lady Roxy?  
I think you can let me go now.”

“What? Already?”

My Telepathy skill kicked in, and Lady  
Roxy's thoughts flowed through me.

*“What a pity. But who's a good boy?  
Fay's a good boy!”*

With that, Lady Roxy gently rubbed  
my head.





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WRITTEN BY  
ISSHIKI ICHIKA

ILLUSTRATED BY  
FAME



*Seven Seas Entertainment*





BOSHOKU NO BERUSERUKU  
-OREDAKE LEVEL TO IU GAINEN WO TOPPA SURU - VOL. 1

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Illustrations by fame

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## Chapter 1: The Forsaken

**I**N THIS WORLD , there existed the concept of “levels.”

All living creatures started at Level 1 and leveled up by collecting Spheres, earned by defeating the monsters that ran rampant through the land. However, these monsters were incredibly dangerous, and not just anyone could defeat them.

People capable of taking down monsters were called “adventurers”—men and women who wielded powerful attack skills. “Skills” were unique, special gifts from the gods awarded at the time of one’s birth. Everybody had at least one, and they lived by the use of its power. Thus, those with strong skills were those chosen by the gods. That was what my dad taught me before he died.

My skill was Gluttony. As a skill, it was nothing but a problem, because all it meant was that I was eternally hungry. In the village where I was born, they called me a deadbeat and bullied me because of it.

In this world, I was unnecessary. I was one of the forsaken.

My dad had been my protector, but when illness took him, the village drove me out on account of my useless skill. I ended up in the Kingdom of Seifort. At the time, my heart was full of hope. I was certain there’d be something I could do in a city so big.

But I couldn’t find a decent job, so I ended up working for daily wages as a castle gatekeeper. It was grueling work standing guard through rain, wind, and snow. On top of that, the pay was abysmal.

Truthfully, gatekeeping wasn’t the work of commoners; it was supposed to be carried out by the kingdom’s holy knights. However, because gatekeeping was considered “3D”—dirty, difficult, and dangerous—high-ranking knights often hired day laborers to work in their stead.

“Hey, gatekeeper! You better not be slacking off on your shift, you hear me?”

The young trio of holy knights grinned, striding toward me in their glorious armor. They were the three siblings of Vlerick, one of Seifort’s five esteemed families. They were also my bosses. The one who spoke to me was Rafale, the eldest. The tall figure to his right was his younger brother, Hado. Behind them was Memil, their sister and the youngest of the three. Each was an outstanding holy knight in their own right, and the sight of their purple-haired heads sent chills everywhere they went.

Among adventurers, holy knights were masters of special skills imbued with holy attributes. Moreover, the title of “holy knight” was an honor bestowed upon only those of the highest status. With their powerful skills, blessed by divinity, holy knights could fight the strongest monsters and reach the highest levels. In this world, when the powerful rose in level, their status and renown rose as well. Compared to peasants like myself,



holy knights were on an entirely different plane of existence. This meant that angering them was inevitably dangerous.

"Yes, Lord Rafale Vlerick," I said.

Rafale disgusted me. I couldn't stand him. I knelt and bowed before him all the same.

"Here's your daily wages."

Rafale tossed a few copper coins at my feet. His siblings chuckled at the display of power.

"Well, better hurry," he said. "I don't pay full rates to the lazy, you know."

He knew as well as I did: these wages were my life. I scurried to pick up the coins, but as I reached for the last one, Rafale stepped on my hand.

"Oh, I'm sorry. Is that a hand? It's so filthy, I couldn't tell."

He bellowed with laughter as he crushed my hand beneath his foot. Oh, yes, so unintentional.

"Don't forget," Rafale continued, "that useless cretins like you work because of *us*. You are replaceable. Do you understand? Or is the concept too difficult for a half-wit to fully comprehend?"

"That's right!" Hado said to me. "You're slacking off. Gatekeeping is a job of great honor that you're doing by our blessing. It used to be a volunteer position, but we're paying you out of the goodness of our hearts. So show those copper coins more respect, gatekeeper."

"It really is just as my brothers say, you know," said Memil. "Your mistakes become our problems. If you make a single one, we won't let you off lightly."

This was their idea of education. They crushed me into place. They drilled my status into the very marrow of my bones; I was the tiniest and weakest of living creatures, and because of the Vlericks, I was allowed to keep living. Until I agreed with that, I wouldn't be permitted to pick up the last coin. If I fought back, I could say goodbye to gatekeeping. And if they even *thought* I was resisting, it might be goodbye to life, too.

These master-slave conversations had gone on for more than five years. But if I tried to quit, Rafale and his siblings would go crazy with rage. They'd find some groundless accusation to pin on me. That was who they were.

I was full of an anger that had grown and simmered within me over five years. Being forced to obey enraged me, and I resented the powerlessness that left me unable to do anything but listen.

Just then, my Gluttony awakened and let forth a rumble from my stomach. A menacing look crossed Rafale's face, and he began berating me.

"You wretched, loathsome mealworm. You're not even worthy of a gatekeeping position. Are you trying to tell me we don't give you enough to eat? Are you trying to cast shame upon the great Vlerick family?!"

With that, Rafale kicked me in the stomach. Not using his full power, but it was still the kick of a holy knight. The difference between Rafale's

stats and mine was like the difference between the sun and a guttering candle. The shock felt as if the kick had forced my insides out. I writhed on the ground, heaving up my guts as I struggled to catch my breath.

In the pulsing, dizzying blur of my wavering consciousness, a voice I recognized as Memil's drifted to my ears.

"Ew, how disgusting. He's like a maggot."

"On your feet, gatekeeper! If you can't do your job, you'll make us look bad in front of the other holy knights." Rafale placed his foot on my head. "I said, on your feet!"

But it was impossible. The difference in our strength was too overwhelming. I couldn't stand until Rafale lifted his foot. He knew that too, and he clearly enjoyed watching me struggle under his weight. He leaned down further. My head felt like it would split from the pain.

"Rafale, stop that immediately! You'll kill him. He's one of the people you're supposed to protect. Such behavior is unbecoming of a holy knight."

Rafale grunted. "Roxy Hart... So you're next on duty today."

Roxy Hart was different from the other holy knights. She believed in protecting the weak from those who abused their strength, and her golden hair flapping in the wind was the very image of courage and valor.

She had just saved me.

The Harts were another of Seifort's five esteemed families. They were well-known for upholding the values of honesty and justice. For that reason, the public adored Lady Roxy, and naturally I was among her many devotees.

As Lady Roxy glared in their direction, Rafale, Hado, and Memil threw curses and left. But as they did, Rafale looked back at Lady Roxy with a defiant grin. I knew that look, and I knew that face. It was spiteful and vindictive. Rafale was no doubt already considering how to get his revenge for this humiliation.

Roxy paid Rafale no mind. Instead, she took my hand, helped me to my feet, and wiped my bloodied forehead with her handkerchief.

"Are you all right?"

"Yes," I said. "It's...it's always like this. Thank you for helping me, Lady Roxy."







"No need for thanks. We're both gatekeepers. This is the least I can do. Anyway, your shift is over. I'll take it from here."

I bowed deeply and passed Roxy my spear. It was adorned with a flag, upon which the royal family's coat of arms was embroidered; this spear was the sign of the gatekeeper. Roxy took it with due gravitas. She treated even "3D" duties like this with respect and honor. It made her different from the other holy knights.

It was this Roxy who took my hand in hers and spoke with a worried look. "If anything like this happens again, I..."

"No, I can't cause you any further trouble. I'll be fine. Thank you."

Lady Roxy still wanted to say something, but I left before she could. I didn't want her getting involved with the Vlerick family any more than she already was. There was no telling what underhanded tactics they'd use to get to her, and just imagining it sent me into a spiral of despair. I wanted Lady Roxy to forge ahead on her own path. I knew that whatever she ended up doing, it would be for the benefit of the people.

I headed off to the local tavern to drown my sorrows. The moon was high in the sky by the time I arrived. Late nights were busy times for taverns. All manner of people—from merchants and travelers to harlots and the like—sat drinking until their faces went red.

I took my usual spot at the counter, where the barkeep poured my usual wine without my saying a word. It was the cheapest wine available and horribly acidic. Its sole purpose was getting one drunk enough to forget one's sorry lot.

"Bread and soup, barkeep."

"You got it."

My dinner was hard rye bread that had been left out for too long, and tasteless soup made with vegetables left over from other dishes. I hadn't tasted meat in at least five years, and the last time I'd done so, it was a sliver of jerky. I couldn't even remember the aroma.

Though my Gluttony skill meant I was always hungry, I didn't have the money to satisfy my cravings. The best I could do was put off the hunger pangs by eating my food as slowly as possible. While I nibbled my bread and sipped my wine, the barkeep came over.

"How's the gatekeeping going?"

"It's rough."

"I see... Well, I'll be praying that you don't end up like the guy before you."

I didn't reply. It was said that the gatekeeper the Vlerick family hired before I started had died of overwork. He hadn't been too different from me—just another guy with barely a skill to his name. Over those relentless, punishing gatekeeping shifts, he became skinny and weak, and one day he simply collapsed and died like a puppet whose strings were cut.

The guy had died still doing his duty. But when the Vlericks found him, they trod all over his corpse and called him useless. The barkeep said

he'd seen it with his own eyes. He said that, even now, he couldn't forget that tragic sight. It was burned into the very meat of his mind.

*So what's going to happen to me...? I wondered.*

If Roxy hadn't stepped in while Rafale "educated" me, I might've ended up as just another version of that awful story. I'd survived the day... but at this rate, my future didn't look as though it would be a long one.



## Chapter 2: From the Darkness Comes Gluttony

**P**LEASANTLY TIPSY off my glass of wine, I decided to check on Lady Roxy before heading back to the hovel I called home. After the incident with Rafale earlier, I was worried about her.

Rafale was as sly as they came, but I didn't think he would lash out right away. Still, I couldn't get his cunning smile out of my head. I knew a weakling like me would be no help to Lady Roxy if anything happened, but I could at least provide her with a human shield.

I followed the moonlit roads to a point from which I could see the castle gate. Lady Roxy stood resolute at her post. I heaved a great sigh of relief. I had worried over nothing, it seemed. My soul at ease, I wished her good luck from the bottom of my heart.

As I made to leave, I spied a flock of shadows scrambling up the eastern castle wall. That area was a blind spot for anyone on guard duty, and it was only by coincidence that I spotted it from where I stood. Bandits. It had to be. I could think of no one else who would climb the walls to enter the castle in the middle of the night. I rushed down the street toward Lady Roxy.

"Lady Roxy! Trouble!"

"What's wrong? Shouldn't you be at home...?"

"I went for a walk to clear my head! There's a group of people scaling the east wall!"

"Are you certain?!"

"Yes. I saw it with my own eyes!"

I wasn't sure Lady Roxy would believe me, but she looked me in the face and said, "I trust you. I'm heading over there now. Will you look after the gate while I'm gone?"

"Yes, of course."

She passed me the gatekeeper's spear.

"Good luck, Lady Roxy," I said.

"Leave it to me." Lady Roxy unsheathed a silver sword from her belt. "As long as I have this with me, I'll be fine."

She sped off toward the eastern wall. Instantly, she disappeared into the darkness.

*Wow, those holy knights are fast.*

Then I heard the screams of the men inside. It was easy to imagine quick, gallant Lady Roxy cutting the bandits down one after another. Judging by their screams, the bandits had come in significant numbers. There were definitely more than two or three. Still, Lady Roxy was a holy knight. A group of lowly bandits couldn't catch her off guard. Sure enough, the sounds of battle soon faded into silence.

Just when I thought it was over, a lone man staggered out of the darkness toward me. As he drew closer, the moonlight brought his features into sharp relief. My breath caught in my throat at the sight of him.

The bandit's right arm had been cut off, and as he stumbled toward the gate where I stood, he tried desperately to stop the bleeding with his left hand. His face was pale, sickeningly white from blood loss.

I gripped my spear. I wouldn't let him get away. It didn't matter that he was a dying human being; he was a thief, a violent criminal, and he needed to be stopped. If he escaped while I was covering for Lady Roxy, the blame would ultimately fall on her shoulders. I couldn't let that happen. I had to kill him.

*He's wounded, I thought. Even someone as weak as me should be able to handle this.*

Gritting my teeth, I thrust my spear with everything I had. It pierced the bandit's heart. He gripped the spear with a wild, intense glare, then fell on his back in a horrific spray of blood. His arms and legs spasmed for a time, until finally his body stopped moving. There was no mistaking it. The bandit was dead.

"I did it—I killed him. I...huh?!"

I felt something flow into my body, followed by the echo of a metallic voice in my head.

***Gluttony skill activated. Stats increased: Vitality +120, Strength +150, Magic +100, Spirit +100, Agility +130. Skills added: Identify, Telepathy***

*Stats increased? Skills added? What's this voice? What's going on?*

Then the most wonderful, glorious sensation—that of an eternally empty stomach truly filling for the first time. I'd never felt so satisfied in my life.

While I was lost to this ecstasy, Lady Roxy returned to the gate. She took my hand and looked me over, checking for injuries.

"Are you okay? Are you hurt?"

*"Is he all right? He looks pale... Oh, I'm so worried!"*

What was that? I could hear Lady Roxy's voice in my head. She wasn't speaking, but somehow, her words swam into me.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"No, it's nothing," I said. "I'm fine."

*"He's fine! Thank the gods he's okay."*

Lady Roxy's relief echoed through me again. When she released my hand, her voice faded. Were those...her thoughts? Was I reading her mind?

Stranger things had happened...hadn't they? Perhaps this was an aftereffect of the shock of battle. Perhaps I was simply imagining her voice. It wasn't as though I could just go touching Lady Roxy again to make sure. She was a holy knight, after all.

In any case, holy knights were phenomenal. In total, ten bandits had broken into the castle, and Lady Roxy took them all on by herself. I had

taken care of the last straggler, but only because Lady Roxy left him pretty much at death's door.

The castle was safe, all thanks to her.

"Lady Roxy, please," I said. "I can't take any credit for what happened here."

"Oh, but you must. You defeated one of the bandits, too."

I had a reason for avoiding official involvement: Rafale and his siblings. If they discovered that I'd helped another holy knight while I was meant to be on duty in service to their house, they'd go berserk. I had no idea what they'd do to me, but given how Rafale felt about Lady Roxy, I was certain I'd be in for an even harsher "education" session.

"If Lord Rafale hears about this," I said, "It's not going to be good for me."

"Ah, I see. Very well. I'll do as you suggest."

"Thank you."

"No, please, I should be thanking *you*. If you hadn't told me about those bandits, I would've been the laughingstock of the holy knights."

It seemed there were power struggles even among the highest echelons. But, being of such low status, I had no way of knowing how demanding those struggles were.

"Then you must let me show my gratitude," Lady Roxy said.

"No, no. I couldn't let a holy knight do such a thing..."

Lady Roxy wasn't a fan of my dogged modesty, and her cheeks puffed up into a pout. It surprised me. She usually never let her chivalrous mien drop. I felt as though I'd grown just a touch closer to her.

"Ah, I've got it!" Lady Roxy clapped her hands, though the gesture felt somewhat forced.

My heart pounded. I knew she intended to reward me, whether I liked it or not, but I didn't know what was coming. I never could have imagined what she said next.

"Would you consider working for the Hart family? If I told my father about what happened here, I'm certain he would agree to hire you."

"What?! But...I don't even have any skills, and I'm...I'm not worthy."

"That isn't true at all. Did you not just now defeat a bandit by your own hand?"

That had been little more than dumb luck. If I were made to do it again, I would certainly fail.

"But I..."

Frustrated by my indecisiveness, Lady Roxy spelled it out. "If you're worried about the Vlerick family...allow me to take care of them. Or do you intend to work under them for the rest of your life?"

She saw right through me. She knew I was concerned about what the Vlerick family might do to enjoy themselves at my expense. Even then, she still wanted to hire me. I could have cried.



In front of me lay two paths: a future in which Rafale and his siblings used and discarded me, and I died of overwork, and beside that, a brighter life, a brighter future, under the kind and beautiful Lady Roxy.

I didn't need to think twice. I was already one of Lady Roxy's devotees. This was like a dream come true.

"Lady Roxy," I said, "I accept your offer!"

"Excellent. Well, it's late, so you should go home. Come to Hart Manor at noon the day after tomorrow. I'll be waiting."

I was so happy, I could have exploded, but I held it in. I bowed over and over with gratitude until finally I headed home. When I was far enough away that the castle gate was no longer visible, I jumped for joy. Luck had finally turned my way. I felt as if I were floating. It was all too good to be true.

I bounded home to prepare for the day after tomorrow.

## Chapter 3: Skill Study

UPON RETURNING HOME, I soaked an old rag in water to wash my body. I hoped that would be enough to clean me up for going to Hart Manor in two days' time. Then I lit a precious candle to examine myself in my fractured mirror.

Nothing much had changed. My clothes were still a patchwork mess, and washing myself wasn't going to change that, so I gave up. I rolled onto the bundle of straw I called a bed, stared up at the ceiling stains left by leaking water, and reflected on what I'd just been through.

The day had started with Rafale's brutal notion of self-improvement. But that very night, I'd fought bandits with Lady Roxy, and now there was even a chance I could start working for the Hart family. It was like a dream.

Then I remembered the metallic voice I'd heard after killing that bandit. It said my stats had increased. It also told me I got new skills: Identify and Telepathy. Laughable. Identify was a rare skill. It gave its user detailed information about things that existed in the world. If I'd really acquired it, it would make my life a whole lot easier. Ha ha.

I muttered the word "Identify" and, against all my expectations, the following information appeared in the air over my head:

***Fate Graphite, Lv 1***

***Vitality: 121***

***Strength: 151***

***Magic: 101***

***Spirit: 101***

***Agility: 131***

***Skills: Gluttony, Identify, Telepathy***

"Whoa! What the hell?!" I exclaimed. *Okay Fate, calm down .*

I checked my stats first. They had always been a clean sweep of ones across the board, but now they were all triple digit. With these stats, I could fight low-level monsters.

Next, skills. I used to have Gluttony and only Gluttony, but now I had Identify and Telepathy, too.

*This is unbelievable...*

But the fact that I could check my own stats and skills was proof in itself; I now possessed Identify.

*Wait, wait.*

If I had Identify, I could quit gatekeeping and become an appraiser. They made good money, because their skills were highly specialized.

*What on earth is going on here? All right, calm down, Fate. Be practical.*

I used Identify to more closely examine my other skills.

***Telepathy: Read the thoughts of those you come in contact with.***

I had experienced this skill already, when Lady Roxy held my hand. I heard her thoughts because the skill had activated.

But why was this happening? I racked my brain for an explanation and finally arrived at an answer. It lay in the words the metallic voice had spoken: *Gluttony skill activated.*

Whatever was going on was a result of the Gluttony skill, which I'd long thought to be completely useless. But now I could use Identify to examine Gluttony.

***Gluttony: You are eternally hungry.***

Well, that much I already knew. It was exactly what the appraiser had said when they visited my village during my childhood. This meant the Gluttony skill contained a hidden, unidentifiable power. As far as I could tell, that power was the ability to devour the essence—the soul—of what I killed, thereby stealing their stats and skills. As a side effect, my empty stomach filled.

I had the potential to grow exponentially stronger, depending on how I used Gluttony from here on out. But I wasn't about to just start murdering people, either.

What to do? The answer was simple: monsters roamed the wilds just outside the Kingdom of Seifort. If I killed them, I could take their skills and stats. With my stats where they were now, I stood a good chance of defeating low-level monsters. I could make a new start as an adventurer.

Then, one day, I would be stronger than a holy knight. When that happened, Rafale and the Vlerick family would have to crane their necks to look up and see what I had become. Just thinking about it made me want to dash out of my hovel and start monster hunting. But it was too dangerous to go after dark, even for someone of my new stats, so I decided to get a good night's sleep and head out in the morning.

Actually, I was supposed to gatekeep for Rafale early the next morning. But you know what? I wasn't going to go. I would take Vlerick orders no longer. I had a new boss, and her name was Lady Roxy. If the meeting with her father two days from now went well, he'd hire me. An honest, decent life awaited me.

For now, I'd focus on tomorrow: get equipped, go monster hunting, and grow stronger.

I closed my eyes, and my consciousness quickly faded.

\*\*\*

I woke to the sound of cawing birds. I fixed my bedhead in my broken mirror, brushed my teeth with a tree sprig, and dressed. Then I took a small leather pouch from where I'd hidden it in a crack in the wall. In the pouch were my life savings: two silver coins, painstakingly earned over five years. A silver coin was equivalent to one hundred copper coins, and one hundred silver coins converted to a gold coin. I'd never even touched one of those.

Others might have laughed at my two silver coins, but I'd gone through multiple hells to earn that money. It was my getaway savings, for the day when Rafale was done with me and I feared for my life. But that worry was gone, at least for now. Instead, I would use this money to invest in monster-hunting equipment.

With my two coins in hand, I bounded out the door.

The Kingdom of Seifort consisted of four districts. The castle sat in its center, and around the castle were districts to the north, east, south, and west.

The holy knights' training grounds were located in the northern Military District, and special weapons and armor were developed there.

The kingdom's high-ranking holy knights lived in the Holy Knight District to the east.

The southern Merchant District was packed with stalls and shops selling all manner of goods, including weapons, daily necessities, and food.

The western Residential District was where the common folk like myself resided.

From the allocation of the districts, one could see how well the holy knights were treated—their business took up a full half of the city.

I headed to the kingdom's busiest, most bustling district: the Merchant District.

I pushed past the Residential District's crowds and into the Merchant District, which was lined with redbrick buildings. From there, I slipped into a back alley filled with stalls and ringing with spirited voices calling to passersby.

This was the other side of the Merchant District. I'd come here because I only had two silver coins; I'd be lucky to get my hands on a worn-out secondhand weapon. With what I was wearing, I didn't stand a chance of getting into an establishment for high-grade weapons. In other words, I'd come to the marketplace for everything people didn't want anymore.

I was searching the stalls selling secondhand weapons when a chubby middle-aged man called out to me. He threw me a friendly smile and seemed kind enough. "Are you looking for a weapon, my friend?"

"Yes. How'd you know?"

"I've been doing this a long time, and I watched you work your way down the row. You don't have eyes for anything but weapons."

I was a little taken aback—he was spot on. This salesman was a smooth one.

"Well? Won't you take a look at my selection?"

Numerous weapons—the most I'd seen so far—were laid out along his table.

"And what's your budget today, my friend?"

I told the merchant of my two silver coins, and his friendly attitude melted away. Not a sliver of his earlier kindness remained. There were only his hard eyes looking down on me, like those of Rafale and his siblings.

"I knew it," he said. "Just another one of the poor. I can't believe I even tried. With two silver coins, you can buy any of the scrap from that corner. That trash should suit you just fine."

He knew I didn't have the money to purchase a serious weapon. But even if I got mad, and even if I stormed off in a rage, it would be no different at any other stall. My best options were still here, where I at least had an abundance of junk to choose from.

I took each of the old weapons in hand and analyzed them with Identify. They were all right on the brink of their durability levels. A few swings, and they'd shatter. Lost in despair, I rummaged through the weapons until I found an old black sword. As I laid my hand upon it, a voice flowed into me.

*"Buy me. You will not regret it."*

It was a husky male voice, speaking through my Telepathy.



## Chapter 4: The Greed of the Black Sword

**“W**HOA! This sword talked!”

I dropped the sword to the ground, dumbfounded by its sudden comment. The merchant and nearby customers narrowed their eyes and glared at me. Their gazes said it all: *What the hell are you doing? If you're not going to buy something, scram.*

But I was far from caring about any of them.

*It talks. The sword talks. What is this...?* I'd never heard of a sword with a personality—a soul?

I analyzed it with Identify.

***Greed***

***Type: One-handed sword***

*What? That's it?*

Identifying other weapons showed me information like durability and attack stats, but for the black sword, all I could see were its name and type.

I carefully examined the mysterious blade. It was filthy, caked in oil and dust. Honestly, it was just like me, especially in the way it was regarded as trash. When I thought of it like that, I felt a kind of affinity for the sword.

And I'd definitely heard a voice. *“Buy me,”* he'd said.

There was an arrogance to his tone, but I didn't sense bad intentions. And if the sword was going to do something troubling to me when I touched it, it would have done so already. I didn't see any immediate risk in handling it again, so I gripped it decisively.

*“I thought you'd run away. My, you are an interesting one. So what's it going to be? Will you buy me?”*





I took a last glance at the other old weapons. The only worthwhile blade among them was this black sword, Greed. A sword that could speak. I could make that work.

"We're not too different, you and I," I said. "Consider yourself sold."

*"Is that so? Well, pay the fat man his money. Looking at his face makes me sick."*

I took Greed to the merchant, who was talking to another customer, and I placed my two silver coins on the counter. The merchant's eyes flickered toward the coins. Then he shooed me away like I was a mangy stray. Horrible, right to the end. I left the stall, and I would not be back again.

I took a rag from my pocket to wipe down the newly purchased Greed. However, the blade's oily residue was stubborn, and it wouldn't come off. If I'd had some soap... But I no longer had the money.

"I'm counting on you, Greed!"

*"Our meeting is fortuitous," said Greed. "Or is it...fate, I wonder? What is your name?"*

Come to think of it, I still hadn't introduced myself.

"I'm Fate Graphite."

*"Hm. Fate indeed. I will not forget it. Well, what now?"*

I had known the answer to that question since last night.

"I just got a weapon. What do you think?"

*"Hunting?"*

"That's right! Monster hunting!"

With my new partner Greed by my side, I headed from the Merchant District straight to Seifort's southern gate. That gate was much larger than those of the other districts. A great deal of cargo and produce passed through it to the Merchant District, and it was wide enough for ten caravans to roll through simultaneously side by side.

Not far from the southern gate was a territory called the Goblin Grasslands. Numerous goblins called it home, and spent their days attacking passing caravans to steal food. As far as monsters went, goblins were the bottom of the barrel, which made them perfect for rookie adventurers.

There was one thing you had to be careful of when it came to goblins: they liked to attack from tall grass. Sometimes people chased one goblin down only to find themselves surrounded by others that had been hiding. That was a death sentence. This tactic was so well-known, it was a proverb: "A goblin in the open means a hundred in hiding."

I'd heard all this from an old adventurer who sometimes forced me to drink with him at the local bar. I never imagined his advice would ever actually be relevant to my life.

My path to becoming an adventurer would begin with a goblin hunt. Thanks to the stats I'd earned from the bandit I killed, I would be able to slay a goblin, devour its soul, and make its power mine, too.

Weaving between caravans, I made my way to the gate, where I found a sizable crowd of adventurers. Men and women alike were equipped with armor and weapons. I'd stumbled on a meeting place for adventurers, all of them looking to join impromptu hunting parties.

A hunting party... That sounded nice. I had always been alone in my village; the only time I wasn't by myself was when I was bullied. Even since arriving in Seifort, Rafale had worked me so hard I never had the chance to make any friends.

Hunting parties were like the groups of heroes my father had told me about in his old stories. Fighting side by side, cheering each other up in the hard times and shedding tears together in the sad. As a young boy, listening to those stories always brought enraptured light to my eyes.

"Friends," I said without thinking. "That sounds nice."

*"You've got me," said Greed.*

"Uh, yeah... Yeah, I do."

However, Greed was an object. What I wanted were bonds with real, living people. The difference felt pretty stark. So I took a deep breath, plucked up my courage, and walked into the crowd of adventurers.

*It's okay. I'm no longer one of the forsaken*, I thought. After all, now I knew the truth about Gluttony. With that, I could make a monster's power my own. Surely I belonged here in this circle of brave fighters. Surely a group would accept me.

Right as I thought that, an adventurer about my age approached me.

"That sword's telling me you're ready for a goblin hunt!" he said.

"How about it? Wanna team up?"

"Would that be okay?!"

I was so happy I could have burst. I barely knew what it meant to be needed by another person. Merely being asked made me happy beyond belief. I was helpful, useful!

"Well, you see, my usual hunting partner can't make it today, so I'm stuck. What level are you, anyway?"

"Level 1!"

The young adventurer flinched. He scratched his head and said he'd just remembered some errands he had to get to, at which point he slowly backed away and skittered off. I was left with a strange, awkward emptiness.

*"Fate," Greed said, "give it up. While you're Level 1, everyone will be like him. Would you want to go into a life-or-death battle with someone you thought wouldn't have your back?"*

My breath caught in my throat. I'd thought I was strong because I'd gone from all ones across the board to stats in triple digits. But really, I was just starting out. I was so used to being treated like trash that, for a moment there, I'd lost touch with what "normal" even meant.

"I had my head in the clouds, didn't I?"



*"Indeed. And, in any case, Gluttony isn't a skill you should be showing to other people. That is as much as I can say."*

"How do you know about my Gluttony...?" I hadn't said anything about it, yet somehow, he knew.

*Greed let out a sly chuckle. "Because we truly aren't so different, you and I. In time, you will understand, whether you like it or not."*

With that pompous little riddle, Greed fell into silence. I still had questions, but for now, I suspected he was right. Things might break bad if other adventurers learned about my unique power. If it became known that I devoured the skills of those I killed, some adventurers might start worrying I would try to take theirs. It wouldn't be outside the realm of possibility for people like that to want to preemptively kill me. They'd want to get me while I was still weak. This was exactly the way a person like Rafale would think, and he couldn't be the only one of his foul kind.

Putting my own safety first meant hunting alone, just me and Greed, until I became so powerful nobody could touch me.

We would start with goblins.

## Chapter 5: Eat All the Things

I HID IN THE GRASS at the edge of the Goblin Grasslands. Just a short distance away squatted a goblin, yawning. The green-skinned monster stood about as high as my waist, and its tattered clothes looked stolen.

The goblin hadn't noticed me. Its guard was down. I scanned the immediate area, but the monster seemed alone. Holding my breath, I circled toward the goblin's blind spot, where I used Identify.

***Goblin Fighter, Lv 3***

***Vitality: 30***

***Strength: 40***

***Magic: 10***

***Spirit: 10***

***Agility: 30***

***Skills: Strength Boost (Low)***

A goblin fighter... It seemed goblins came in a few different classes. This one's stats were much lower than mine.

Next, I used Identify on the goblin's skill.

***Strength Boost (Low): Slightly increases the power of physical attacks.***

The skill was a stat boost, then. If this Strength Boost was low, that meant there were probably medium and high versions, too. I needed to start grabbing useful skills wherever I could.

The goblin finally lost out to sleepiness and drifted into slumber. This was my chance!

I leapt out from the grass and dashed to close in on the goblin. It awoke to the sound of my furious footsteps and turned to face me, but it was too late. The black sword Greed cleaved a smooth arc through the air, severing the goblin's head from its shoulders. The goblin died before it even had a chance to cry out, let alone fight back.

As it died, a familiar metallic voice echoed in my head.

***Gluttony skill activated. Stats increased: Vitality +30, Strength +40, Magic +10, Spirit +10, Agility +30. Skill added: Strength Boost (Low).***

Yes! Just to be sure, I used Identify to analyze my stats again.

***Fate Graphite, Lv 1***

***Vitality: 151***

***Strength: 191***

***Magic: 111***

***Spirit: 111***

***Agility: 161***

***Skills: Gluttony, Identify, Telepathy, Strength Boost (Low)***

My stats were rising. I was getting stronger.

Greed chuckled as I stood there, lost in joy as I gazed at my stats and skills.

*“Overreacting a little for a measly goblin, don’t you think? If we have to do a victory dance every time you kill such a wretch, we won’t get anything done.”*

“Give me a break, would you? I just killed my first monster.”

Maybe a “measly goblin” didn’t mean anything to the other adventurers, but until yesterday, I’d lived in honest fear of all these beasts. I felt an indescribable new freedom now that the tables had turned.

I cut off the goblin’s ears as proof I’d slain it. The kingdom rewarded anyone who helped keep the monster population down; you exchanged proof for money at the designated trading post. One pair of goblin ears was worth ten copper coins, which was more than my daily gatekeeping wages. Adventuring was dangerous, but the money was great. I tucked the goblin ears in a burlap bag I’d brought with me. It was time for the next target.

I cautiously continued through the field until I found two goblins in a clearing. I could tell one of them was a goblin fighter, based on the sword he carried, but the other held only a large shield. Fortunately, I didn’t need to stand around guessing what that meant. I had Identify.

***Goblin Guard, Lv 3***

***Vitality: 40***

***Strength: 20***

***Magic: 10***

***Spirit: 10***

***Agility: 10***

***Skills: Vitality Boost (Low)***

The goblin guard had a touch more health than the goblin fighter and, to go with it, a low vitality-boost skill. But I figured that, as long as I could avoid letting my attacks bounce off that shield, this battle was mine.

I watched the two goblins from the shadows of the high grass, deciding which to take first. At a glance, it looked like the sword-wielding goblin fighter was the better option. But if my first attack failed, or the goblins noticed me coming, that shield-carrying guard would be a problem while I took on the fighter.

Though I suspected I could have overwhelmed the two goblins by force, I wasn’t used to battling monsters. I wanted to be certain of my attack plan, so I decided to start with the guard.

I waited for the goblins to separate and put a little distance between themselves.

*Now!*

I dove out of hiding while the guard faced the other way, but its reflexes were sharp. It sensed me coming and turned with its shield at the ready. Greed was already flying through the air; my sword was going to bounce off the goblin’s shield.

Or so I thought.

“Augh!”

The guard let out a scream as the black sword carved through goblin *and* shield as if through paper. It seemed Greed was far sharper than he appeared. If that was the case, these goblins had no chance of stopping my attacks.

***Gluttony skill activated. Stats increased: Vitality +40, Strength +20, Magic +10, Spirit +10, Agility +10. Skill added: Vitality Boost (Low)***

The metallic voice rang in my head as I dashed toward the remaining goblin. It had noticed me, of course, and now waved its sword menacingly. I kept a close eye on it as I paused to ask Greed something.

“Hey, Greed,” I said.

“Hey, *what?*”

“If you’re so sharp, why were you being sold for practically nothing?”

“*It’s simple. I choose who wields me.*”

“Does that mean you’ve accepted I have the right to handle you?”

“*Ugh. Shut it.*”

Greed’s voice was sulky, but his blade glowed with a keen light. His words were often spiteful, but in his own way, Greed had taken to me. I intended to live up to his expectations.

The goblin fighter swung its sword wildly in an attempt to intimidate me, but it made no difference. I cut both it and its sword clean in half and watched as the goblin fell, its eyes rolling back into its head.

***Gluttony skill activated. Stats increased: Vitality +30, Strength +40, Magic +10, Spirit +10, Agility +30***

This time, I didn’t acquire any skills. It seemed I couldn’t stack skills I already owned. If I wanted new powers, I would have to hunt different monsters. But even the stats alone were delicious enough.

I hunted a further twenty-five goblin fighters and ten goblin guards, until my bag was almost full of goblin ears. Then I checked my current stats with Identify.

***Fate Graphite, Lv 1***

***Vitality: 1,371***

***Strength: 1,451***

***Magic: 481***

***Spirit: 481***

***Agility: 1,051***

***Skills: Gluttony, Identify, Telepathy, Strength Boost (Low), Vitality Boost (Low)***

My vitality, strength, and agility stats had all reached four digits, though my magic and spirit stats lagged, because my enemies were also lacking there. It was almost impossible to believe that, just yesterday, all my stats had all been a single digit: one.

One thing bothered me, though—my level. I'd defeated enough enemies to earn the Spheres required for a level up. But something was weird; my level hadn't changed at all.

*Greed chuckled at my confusion. "It's an effect of your Gluttony. Those whose skills violate the natural order of the gods cannot receive the blessings of Spheres."*

*"Violate the natural order of the gods...' What do you mean?"*

*"That's what you're doing. The act of devouring the stats and skills of your enemies through their death is the rejection of the natural order and the very concept of levels. There are no blessings for such people. Your stats were meant to be all ones. And..."*

Greed paused. Something was on his mind.

*"No. It's nothing. It's almost lunch. Shouldn't we be getting back to the kingdom?"*

I was curious and wanted him to continue, but also he was right, I was getting hungry—in the more traditional sense. It was time to finish up and head back to Seifort. My stats had broken four digits, and that was enough for today. Also, I didn't know exactly why, but the goblins had started getting desperate—near vicious—in their attacks. I worried it wasn't safe to push them further. In any case, with my new stats, I could continue on my next hunt—perhaps as far as the forest, to hunt hobgoblins. They were a rank up from ordinary goblins, so they'd fill me up even more.

In high spirits, I began the walk back to the Kingdom of Seifort.



## Chapter 6: Behind the House of Hart

**U**PON MY RETURN to Seifort, I went to the trading post for my reward money.

It was full of rough-looking adventurers standing shoulder to shoulder. I heard the occasional curse thrown around, as well as arguments over exact trading conditions. Getting mixed up with these types could only lead to trouble, so I slipped through the crowds and took my place in line.

The muscular adventurer at the end of the line turned and peered down at me. He chuckled derisively. One look at my clothes, and he probably figured I was some scrub running errands for a real adventurer. Whatever. That was fine by me. If people saw me at the counter with a mountain of monster parts and assumed I was a mere errand boy, it meant I could avoid drawing suspicion with my thirty-eight pairs of ears.

The cashier called for me. "Next in line, please."

I took my small bag stuffed with goblin ears to the counter.

"Let's see here... My, my, that's a lot of hunting. You must have been a big party, huh?"

"Uh...yeah," I said. "Yeah, I was. And we all fought really hard together. We got excited, and, uh...the next thing you know..."

I grasped for details on the fly as I regaled the cashier with the adventures of my nonexistent party. The tale of my imaginary allies...it made me feel kind of...empty.

*"How ridiculous," Greed said.*

"Oh, just shut up, you."

The cashier blinked at me, confusion in their eyes. Nobody could hear Greed's voice, so of course they were taken aback. I'd effectively just told them to shut up mid-conversation. I'd meant the retort for Greed, but naturally, the cashier thought I was talking to them.

"Sorry," I said. "Don't mind me."

I gave as many polite smiles as I had to and managed to get away.

I heaved a sigh of relief as I left the trading post. I'd learned from the cashier that most parties hunted about ten monsters a day, and that was at the high end. This was because hunting the same type of monster built up "hate," which made the type more likely to target you. "Hate" explained why the goblins had come at me so aggressively during the second half of my hunt.

In future, it would be best for me to follow the example of the other adventurers and limit the number of monsters I cashed in to ten. I'd have to give up on anything more than that, because if I kept bringing in mountains of monster parts, it would start to look suspicious. It felt like a waste, but I didn't have a choice.

I looked at my bag of three silver and eighty copper coins. Five years of hardship for two silver coins, and I'd surpassed my savings in half a day.

"Five years of my life..." I muttered.

As I inched closer to what had seemed like an impossible dream of a normal, decent life, I was being forced to see just how twisted the world was. Thinking about it made my rage simmer. All the misery I'd endured at the hands of Rafale and his siblings, the things they'd said. "Useless." "Less than garbage." "You don't even have the right to be angry."

Remembering them made my stomach growl, even though I was full of goblin souls. It was like Gluttony telling me it wanted to eat. That it wanted to be *fed*. But it was too soon for that, and there was Lady Roxy to think of. The Vlericks were no longer only my problem.

Instead, I needed to figure out what to do with the money I'd earned. When I looked down at the patchwork rags I called clothes, I suddenly knew just how to spend it.

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*"The clothes maketh the man, indeed."*

"Shut up, Greed."

We'd gone from rags to not-quite-riches. With two silver coins, I'd bought a decent bespoke outfit from a tailor. With another fifty copper coins, I bought a scabbard for Greed; I threw in another ten coins to have the oily residue cleaned from his blade.

From every angle, I at last seemed like a genuinely normal person. With my new threads, I could go to the Holy Knight District without catching side-eye from any of the guards or gatekeepers. I even had money left over, which meant I could treat myself to what was, by my standards, a princely lunch.

In high spirits, I headed to the main street, which was lined with restaurants and places to drink. I could have gone to one of my regular spots down the backstreets, but I thought it would be nice to go somewhere different for once. This street had the most eateries in the entire kingdom. It was full of people coming and going. There were so many people, in fact, that even if you stopped in place, the crowds would simply pull you along with them.

Now to choose where to go—and what to eat. It had to be meat. If I was going to eat anything, it had to be meat. What would it taste like after five years? Just thinking about it made me drool with excitement.

Greed took the opportunity to speak to me using Telepathy. *"You're overreacting, boy. It's just meat."*

"What are you talking about? It's...it's *meat*!"

*"Ha. As a weapon, I've never understood you people and your appetites. It's more important to make sure you take proper care of me when I'm dirtied in battle. That, to me, is as crucial as eating is to you."*

"Yeah, yeah. Didn't I just spend ten coins to get you cleaned and mended?"

*"If you ask me, you should be able to do that much by yourself."*

Greed was right. Going to the blacksmith all the time would start to add up. Moreover, if I was ever away from the kingdom for days on a long hunt, I would have to do weapon maintenance myself. Even so, because the black sword's blade didn't blunt, "maintenance" would only mean wiping away blood and gristle.

I thought I could leave it at that, but Greed didn't care for my nonchalance. He was adamant that I keep him clean. I guess that, just like people, he didn't care for grime. He was different from other weapons, after all. He was a sword with a soul.

Knowing he felt that way made me wonder what feelings had curdled within him while he rotted away at that weapon stall, covered in dust and oil and treated like nothing. If I asked, I knew he wouldn't say a word. He was stubborn like that.

"All right," I said. "How about after lunch we make sure we're equipped to keep you in fine form?"

*"Ah, finally. You've realized how important I am. Treat me like you would a precious stone."*

"You really are the bossiest weapon I've ever met, you know that?"

*"Expect nothing less from the greatest of black swords, the mighty Greed."*

I could already imagine him nagging me. *You missed a spot here. Don't forget to clean this*. If he got mouthy, I'd dunk him in a pail of icy well water. That'd give him time to quiet down and cool off.

I was properly hungry now. I'd had enough of maintenance talk. It was time to speak the finest of words: lunch. The transcendent aroma of sizzling meat drifted from the restaurant in front of me. In that instant, my lunch spot was decided.

I hustled toward the restaurant when what looked to be a father and his daughter bowled straight into me. I was caught completely off guard and sent flying onto my butt.

"Look where you're going, you piece of shit," the man growled. "Get out of my way!"

"What?!" I cried.

This scruffy, bearded brute walked into me and had the nerve to talk like that?! I was about to shout back, but the man was already pushing on through the crowd, ignoring me. His young daughter was silent as she let herself be pulled along, but I was still angry at the pigheaded jerk, so I reached out to stop them.

As my hand brushed against the girl's, my Telepathy skill activated.

*"Help... Somebody... Help me..."*

In that tiny moment of contact, I couldn't catch her words clearly enough to be one hundred percent sure, but had the girl cried out for help? Why? They were father and daughter, weren't they? When I looked again,

however, those two didn't resemble each other at all. Was the girl being kidnapped?!

I used Identify on the man as he bulled into the crowd.

**Kasim Black, Lv 15**

**Vitality: 920**

**Strength: 900**

**Magic: 670**

**Spirit: 500**

**Agility: 950**

**Skills:**

He didn't have skills? That was impossible. Skills were a gift from the gods, and everybody was born with one. Had I not read his stats properly? I analyzed him again, but the results were the same.

*Greed's words cut through my confusion. "That man's abilities are hidden by the Conceal skill, so you can't see them with Identify. However, you can tell by his vitality and strength stats that he's an adventurer. That leaves the question: what skill is he hiding? And what are you going to do?"*

"What am I going to do? I don't..."

The man was disappearing into the crowd, dragging the girl with him. The longer I stared, the more certain I became that she was too anxious to speak. Now that I knew this, I couldn't just stand by and watch.

"I guess lunch is cancelled," I said. "Let's go."

*"Oh, how intriguing. Going to help the damsel in distress?"*

"Of course. I can't pretend like I didn't see that."

*"If you've made up your mind, you'll hear no complaints from me. But be on your guard. That man has the eyes of a murderer. Mercy has no place in a confrontation with an enemy like that—one who has killed in cold blood."*

"I...understand."

I had killed before. Even though it had been a bandit who had broken into the castle, taking his life had brought me no pleasure. I would never forget that bandit's glare in the moments of his death.

But I didn't regret it, either. If I'd let that bandit go, Roxy would have been in all sorts of trouble with the other holy knights. I'd heard their power struggles were fierce. I wanted to do what I could to circumvent anything that might force a person like Roxy off her road to success. She was a person who cared for the citizens.

If a piece of trash like me had to get his hands dirty to help her, I was only too happy to do so. I was never going to be a hero, or one of the good guys, or a beacon of justice. That was impossible. But if people were suffering in front of me, I wanted to help. It was simple, really.

My mind made up, I tailed the man and the girl from a safe distance. After a time, they stopped at a series of warehouses clustered together in the Merchant District. These were where goods from outside the kingdom

were delivered and stored. The man hustled the girl into what looked like an abandoned warehouse with worn-out, faded walls.

"Is that his base of operations?"

*"Perhaps. It could be he's meeting someone who means to buy the girl, or it could simply be a place where he intends to work his cruelty."*

"Sick either way. Let's hurry."

I gripped the black sword and closed in on the warehouse. Nobody else was around. I peeked inside through the broken windows set in the old walls.

The man snapped a steel collar around the girl's neck. A rusty chain connected her to a pillar, like a dog. No doubting it now. The girl had been kidnapped. She was petrified into wide-eyed silence, and the man sneered at her.

"A little pain and you kids forget how to speak, huh? Oh, this work really is child's play. You get it? Ha!"

The man slapped the girl across the face, hard. The smack echoed through the warehouse.

"Orphans like you...nobody cares where you go. At the end of the day, your parents abandoned you because you're worthless. Well, am I right?"

The girl's face went pale.

"Ha! Bullseye. I knew it. Go on, tell me what useless skill you were saddled with. What? I can't hear you!"

The girl stared at the ground as tears slid down her cheeks. Even then, fear wouldn't let a single word escape her lips.

This girl was one of the forsaken. She was no different from the me of just a few days ago, despondent and powerless, stuck trying to endure it. Truly, kidnapped for reasons she didn't know, this girl had it harder than I did. I held back my urge to rush in and save her, and waited for the right chance.

Meanwhile, the man relentlessly showered the girl in further abuse.

"Rejoice! Even garbage like you has a place in this world! Your new life as a plaything for a great, revered holy knight is about to begin! I'd say that's a reason to celebrate, don't you think?"

The girl shook her head, tears flowing down her face. The man clicked his tongue in annoyance and slapped her again.

"Looks like someone's not listening to reason. Let me tell you what happens to little girls like that: they end up dead, quick. Why, the little one before you didn't even last a week. It's good business for me, though; with each girl they throw out, I get a request for another."

The man kicked the girl in the stomach. The shock of the blow brought her to her knees. I couldn't stand to watch any longer.

I gripped Greed to unleash him from his scabbard, but he stopped me.

*"Wait, Fate! Patience."*

"But..."



I couldn't bear it. Any more, and the girl might be left with injuries from which she would never recover.

*Even still, Greed held me back. "Do not let your emotions dictate your actions. You'll end up dead. Your stats are only slightly higher than his, and battle experience lies overwhelmingly in his favor. You know this. You know what it means."*

"All right..." I said. "I'll cool down. I'll wait."

Greed was right. Again. I wouldn't win this battle by waving my sword around in a blind rage. The skill gap was far too wide. I calmed my breath and surveyed the warehouse interior. Even though it appeared abandoned, it was full of used wooden crates stacked atop one another. Could I use them to stay out of sight and get into range for a decisive blow?

As I was determining what to do, the man moved. Now that he'd destroyed the girl verbally, he left the warehouse by another door. It seemed he had other business to attend to. If I wanted to act, it was now or never.

I slipped into the warehouse through one of the broken windows and rushed to the girl's side. She was stiff with fear, her head held low. My footsteps probably made her think the man had come back.

First, I had to cut the chain to free her. I pulled Greed from his scabbard and sliced. The blade cut through the rusted chains with ease. One problem down. I knelt by the girl, who was now shaking.

"It's okay," I said. "You'll be okay."

The girl said nothing, but she looked up, startled at the sound of my voice. For a time, she simply stared at me until she realized I wasn't the man who'd taken her. She began to cry again, this time out of relief. It seemed she still wasn't ready to speak. The horror of her abduction had stolen her voice.

"We have to get out of here while we still have the chance," I said.

I took the girl's hand to help her stand, but her look of relief melted into something different. Terror was written across her features, and she stared at something behind me, once more petrified. I glanced backward, where I found the kidnapper I thought had left.

I realized then that this was a trap. The man had known I was tailing them, and left the warehouse to tempt me inside. Now he smirked as he stalked toward us.

"Every now and again, some idiot sees me and wants to play hero," he said. "But you know what? When I kill that guy in front of the kids, they suddenly become oh so obedient. You guys are like moths to flame—you always get burned."

The man drew a one-handed sword from his sheath and stood with it at the ready. Waves of pressure rolled off him and washed over me. This was the difference in battle experience Greed had warned me of.

"What's wrong?" the man barked. "Not so tough when your knees are shaking! Ha ha!"

As he edged closer, I brandished Greed. Behind me, the girl was too scared to flee. Letting the man come to us would force me to protect her while I fought. I needed to find a more advantageous position. If I made any rash moves, however, I'd be doing exactly what my enemy wanted.

I told myself not to panic, but I had to come up with a plan, and I had to do it fast. As if feeling my anxiety through my hands, Greed spoke through my Telepathy.

*"Fate, take the girl and retreat toward the mountain of boxes further back."*

Earlier, I'd seen what he was talking about—a pile of old crates clumsily stacked in a heap. They looked as though they could fall at any moment. On top of that, getting to them would put us further from the exit. I had my doubts, but then I realized Greed's plan. All that was left was to see whether or not it would work...and we wouldn't know that until we tried.

The kidnapper could see from my stance that I was a lower level than him, and that I lacked experience. I intended to use his overconfidence to my advantage. After five years of being pushed around and bullied by Rafale, acting the part of the weak and frightened was as easy to me as breathing. Thinking about it filled me with emptiness, but there was no other choice.

*"Let's go, Fate," said Greed. "Wait for my signal. I'll tell you when."*

*"Okay. Let's do it."*

I grabbed the girl's hand and we fled. I channeled my wasted days as a gatekeeper and acted like I was scrambling, desperate for a way to escape or hide. We darted toward the mountain of old crates.

*"Come on, do it. Take the bait."*

The man curled his lip, the desire to dominate glinting in his eyes. To him, I was just a fumbling, frightened, and confused would-be adventurer.

"Hey," he said, "what happened to Mr. Hero? The guy trying so hard to save that worthless kid? Don't think I'll make this quick, hero. You got in my way, and now I'm going to ruin you."

Intimidate the fearful and remove their ability to fight back. It was a tactic right out of Rafale's playbook. I guess birds of a feather shared the same repellent strategies. That just meant I knew what the man would do next. He would pursue.

"Give it up, hero! You can scuttle away and hide, but it won't make a lick of difference."

The girl and I ran deeper into the warehouse. The space around us grew tight, and we backed into a dead end, surrounded by old boxes stacked high. How would this look to the man? The echo of his relaxed footsteps grew louder. Steel sword in hand, he showed not a hint of concern.

*"Nowhere to run now, hero."*

Step by step, the man closed in.

*Almost, almost.* I motioned for the girl to back up as far as she could.

Then Greed gave me the signal. *"Now, Fate!"*

I held the black sword up high.

The man grinned smugly. "Let me guess. You planned to bury me under all these old boxes, huh? Bet you didn't realize you'd bury yourself and the girl, too. Fear made you stupid, hero."

"Did it now?"

I charged. I had one chance, and if I failed here, there would not be a second. I brought my sword down on the man with everything I had.





We were surrounded by boxes with nowhere to run. My bet was that if I attacked with a large, easy-to-read swing, the man would try to parry it with his sword.

Exactly as I hoped, he didn't move back an inch. Instead, he raised his sword to deflect my strike. He didn't realize I was swinging a black blade that cut through even steel chains as though they were nothing. Greed sliced the man's sword like butter.

"What?! No!"

My blade continued into his shoulder, cutting a line straight down to his waist. Blood flew through the air as the man crumpled to the dirtied floor of the abandoned warehouse. More blood spurted from his mouth as I knelt at his side.

I still needed to know something: which holy knight meant to buy this girl? I wanted the vile creature's name.

"Tell me," I said. "Who put you up to this?"

The man refused to speak, even as he died in front of me.

"Tell me! Who was it?!"

I pushed my blade deeper into his wound. His face twisted in pain, but still he refused to speak. I had no other choice; I would have to use Telepathy to dig into his thoughts. But as I reached out, the man finally gave in to the agony, and he spat a name from his dying lips—a name that disgusted me.

"It was...Hado. Hado...Vlerick..."

*Hado? The second son of the Vlerick family?*

Hado was bad enough in public, and now I was being told he was even worse in private?! How many other young children had ended up as Hado's prey? I didn't have a chance to ask. The kidnapper had lost too much blood, and he was gone.

***Gluttony skill activated. Stats increased: Vitality +920, Strength +900, Magic +670, Spirit +500, Agility +950. Skills added: Conceal, One-Handed Sword Technique***

It was just as Greed had said; the man had a Conceal skill, and he'd used it to hide his One-Handed Sword Technique.

I used Identify to analyze my new skills.

***Conceal: Hides skills from Identify.***

***One-Handed Sword Technique: Increases attack power with one-handed swords. Unlocks the tech-art "Sharp Edge."***

Conceal was exactly as advertised, but the One-Handed Sword Technique was interesting; it included a secret skill called a "tech-art." According to Greed, all such "Technique" skills came with a powerful hidden move. I used Identify again to learn more.

***Sharp Edge: This counterattack inflicts two strikes.***

Sharp Edge... It dawned on me then that, if the man had used this tech-art before I launched my attack, I probably wouldn't be standing here.

It seemed truer than ever that some battles were decided by luck, and I was fortunate to have had it on my side this time.

We'd been in the warehouse for too long, and it was time to get away. The dead man had set up a deal to sell the girl to Hado, and I didn't want us to be found by the Vlericks or their men. After all, I was supposed to be on gatekeeper duty. If they found me here, I would be in for a lengthy, torturous death. My meager stats were still a long way from competing with the likes of them.

I took the girl's hand, and we made a run for it. From the warehouses, we headed to the crowded downtown area. It would be safest to blend in with the crowds.

In the sky above us, the sun began its slow descent. My stomach rumbled as if to remind me of the time. This was not the growl of my Gluttony, which had just now feasted on the soul of a kidnapper. This was a much simpler hunger, the hunger of a body that had missed its lunch and now demanded sustenance.

As I contemplated where to feed myself, I heard the cute sound of a smaller stomach rumbling beside me. The girl I had just saved covered her stomach with her hands, her face red with embarrassment. Nothing like the relaxation of still being alive to remind you of an empty stomach.

"Let's get something to eat," I said. "It's on me."

The girl's face brightened with joy. I was worried the trauma of her kidnapping might have scarred her psychologically, but finally, she was smiling. I hoped my fears were misplaced; if the girl could smile like this, I was sure she would be fine. It was time to get back on schedule, and that meant meat!

In the downtown area there was no lack of selection. I detected a heady scent wafting through the air. Beef stew. Perfect for adults and children alike.

Lunch was decided. I took the girl's hand, and we headed into the restaurant.

It must have been popular, because the place was packed. There were no tables left, but we were in luck; there happened to be two spots open at the counter. We took our seats swiftly, and the server gave us a menu.

"What would you like today?" they asked. "The special comes highly recommended."

The day's special was a fish dish made fresh with catch delivered that very day. The people next to me were already devouring it, and it looked fantastic. Not a bad choice. However...

"We'll have beef stew and some bread," I said. "Enough for two, please."

"Got it."

I'd wanted the stew from the start, and the girl's eyes had lit up when I mentioned it. I couldn't let her down now. We waited excitedly until the



server placed our bowls before us, full of glorious, meaty beef stew with a side of freshly baked bread. It looked nothing short of heavenly.

I was almost drooling, it looked so good. Next to me, the girl couldn't help herself. She *actually* drooled.

"Is this...your first time eating meat?" I asked.

The girl wiped the saliva from her mouth and nodded. She was an orphan, after all, abandoned by her parents because of a skill considered useless. It was no wonder she'd never eaten meat. Even I couldn't afford it, back when I was a gatekeeper.

She looked up at me, her eyes begging for permission to get started. I wasn't about to deny her a good meal.

"Go on," I said. "Let's eat. You've been through a lot today."

I gave the girl a pat on the back, and she began eating tentatively. In mere moments, the stew and bread were gone. Her stomach full, her mind and body finally at ease, the girl let out a slow breath followed by a few gentle sobs.

Finally, her voice was coming back. It gladdened me to hear.

Delicious food really did have the power to make people happy, and it was no different for me; with each mouthful of beef stew, I felt excitement for tomorrow.

The time flew by, and night began to fall. I wasn't sure whether my new orphan friend had a place to go home to, so I asked her. To my surprise, she lived at an old orphanage in the same Residential District slum that I called home. It wasn't far at all!

"In that case," I said, "why don't I walk you part of the way?"

"Yay!"

We left the restaurant and headed from the Merchant District to the Residential District, then into the slums, where the poor and the downtrodden scraped out a place to live. From there, I walked the girl to her orphanage.

We followed a path so ill-maintained it couldn't even be called a path anymore. As the cloudy skies opened, the moon brightened our surroundings. Even though we walked through poverty, it was beautiful to see our way illuminated by the evening light, and it warmed me.

"Your orphanage should be just a little ways ahead," I said. Then, noticing the girl's reticence, "Hm? What's wrong?"

The girl had gone quiet. She'd seemed so near to recovering until a moment ago. Had the memories of today's events come rushing back?

Then she broke into a radiant smile, and I wondered why I'd even worried. "Thank you for saving me!"

Now it was my turn to fall silent. Was this...the first time anybody had ever really thanked me? It was awkward and embarrassing, but also, it was...kind of nice. Mostly, I was just glad, and relieved I could help. It was a sweet thing to feel, once in a while.

The orphanage came into view, and outside it, the nuns who worked there frantically searched for something. I had a feeling that what they were searching for was walking right by my side. Now that we'd come this far, she wouldn't need an escort any further.

"Looks like you can make it on your own from here, yeah?"

"You won't come with me?"

"No, I've got my own home to go to. You be safe, okay?"

My role in this had been over a long time ago. This wasn't a world with kindness to spare for the weak and helpless. But in order to keep on living, there was nothing else to do but forge your own path forward and walk it yourself.

The girl knew it, too, because she let go of my hand and returned alone to the orphanage. In her silhouette, I saw myself on the day I'd left my village all those years ago. With my father lost to illness, my home in the village was gone, and all that had been left was the path that'd lain before me. I didn't know what lay ahead that day, but the only choice I'd had was to walk.

The nuns spied the girl and ran to her, tears in their eyes as they held her close. She'd seemed fine while we walked home, but now, the girl's smile turned to tears that streamed down her face as she sobbed. For the sake of her tomorrow, I hoped she might cry and keep crying until her heart found peace. And I hoped there would be happiness in her future.

I left before the nuns saw me. As I took the path home, Greed spoke through Telepathy.

*"What's wrong? You look like a man who just did something very out of character."*

"Shut up," I said. "It's not like that at all."

Watching the girl had just reminded me of my youth. I could no longer return to the hometown where my parents were buried, nor to the village that drove me out and labeled me a deadbeat. Were it possible, I would've wanted to visit my parents' graves, but I knew the village would no longer have me back.

I would never forget how my father gripped my hand, fearing for my future even as he lay dying of illness. I wondered whether I had lived a life he could be proud of.

"We've still got a ways to go, huh, Greed?"

*"Indeed. This is just the beginning, and I can say this much: there lies a long, long road ahead of you."*

"Well, first we've got to get hired by Lady Roxy's family. And, to be honest, I'm pretty nervous about meeting her father."

*Greed laughed. "Nervous? Already? You won't even see him until noon tomorrow."*

"We're talking about the head of an important family, Greed. One of the five esteemed families in the Kingdom of Seifort. If I'm here on earth,

then Lady Roxy's father is above the clouds. Maybe even higher. I can't believe *you* can be so relaxed."

*"Of course I'm relaxed. I'm a weapon."*

Right. It made sense that an inorganic object wouldn't understand my anxieties, which were driven by a fear that had soaked into me over many, many years. Even though I now knew I could become more powerful and increase my stats through Gluttony, my fear of the holy knights hadn't changed. I knew Lady Roxy's father was a good man, but the idea of meeting him couldn't help but make me nervous, like I had to be ready for anything.

In any case, I was exhausted. I decided to hit the hay early. The day had been filled with too much excitement—I'd woken up to goblin hunt and ended up cutting down a kidnapper. My exhaustion was probably making me overthink everything. I knew I should trust Lady Roxy more than I did, and I felt awful that I couldn't.

I dragged myself into my beaten-up hovel of a home and collapsed in my straw bed. I was tired, and my consciousness faded away in moments.

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I slept until close to noon the following day. Leaping out of bed, I scrambled to get ready. Once I had my things together, I hurried to the Holy Knight District, where Lady Roxy waited.

The Holy Knight District differed from the other districts, first and foremost due to the huge walls surrounding it. They left the impression that another great castle awaited beyond them. I gave the gatekeeper my name and made my way in without issue. It seemed Lady Roxy had let them know I was coming in advance.

However, because Lady Roxy needed to confirm that I was who I claimed, I found myself sandwiched between the two gatekeepers as we walked toward the Hart family manor. It was like I was a criminal who'd been caught mid-crime.

The manor we arrived at was the very symbol of an esteemed family of Seifort. It was impossible to judge the cost of such a place; just trying to think about it was ridiculous. It was enormous.

One guard broke off and entered the manor through the garden. After a short time, he returned with a girl in a white dress. She was breathtaking.

"You came! I've been waiting for you."

It wasn't until I heard her voice that I realized the girl was Roxy. I'd never seen her outside of our work as gatekeepers, for which she wore her white light armor. In her dress, she was so lovely she looked like an entirely different person.

The two guards left us staring at each other. After a time, Roxy spoke—likely because I was standing there with my mouth wide open, dumbfounded.

"Is something the matter?" There was a quizzical look on her face.

"I...I'm sorry for staring. You just...you look beautiful."

Roxy's cheeks went red, and she cleared her throat with a light cough. "Occasionally I wear dresses, you know. I almost didn't recognize you, either. Please, come this way."

For a gigantic manor, the place was surprisingly quiet. There wasn't a servant in sight, and it felt like something was keeping them silent. I followed Roxy, gazing at the immaculately manicured lawns. The silence was overwhelming. All that I could hear was the whistle of the wind. If anything, I noticed a drifting hint of loneliness in Roxy's silhouette.

We came to the front of the manor and turned right.

*Strange*, I thought. *Why aren't we going inside?* I wanted to ask, but the silence of the manor seemed to demand silence from me, too. We proceeded a little further, and the reason for the melancholy quiet revealed itself.

"This is..."

I couldn't bring myself to say anything more. Lady Roxy smiled at me kindly, then knelt and placed a hand on the cold stone of the grave at which we had arrived.

"Father," she said. "Fate will be working for us from today forward. I'm sure he'll bring a little liveliness back to the Hart family." Noticing my confusion, Lady Roxy said, "Five days ago, my father passed away in Galia, to the south of Seifort."

"Galia?"

Galia was a continent overrun by monsters. It was said that the monsters there were many times stronger than anything around the Kingdom of Seifort. The role of holding those monsters back and keeping them from reaching Seifort was the most important function of the holy knights. Those who did this work were granted unbelievable wealth and the highest rank the kingdom could offer.

But it was nearly impossible for me to imagine a monster with the power to kill the head of one of Seifort's five esteemed families. As if reading the fear in my features, Lady Roxy explained, "It was no mere monster that took his life. Galia is also home to the heavenly calamity."

There was only one heavenly calamity she could mean. Wherever it went, it brought earthquakes, floods, and tsunamis. The creature was the living embodiment of the wrath of the gods: the Divine Dragon. It didn't matter how powerful you were; there was no stopping it. The Divine Dragon was so frighteningly strong that people had developed religions around it, calling it a servant of the gods. If the Divine Dragon had you in its sights, there was nothing to do but prepare for your final moments.

"They said my father's entire army was lost to it," Lady Roxy said. "We have a full thousand years of records, and none of have ever spoken of the dragon ever ranging so far from its nest, let alone so near the border."

The Divine Dragon's nest was in the center of Galia. I'd never heard tell of it coming as far as the outskirts of the continent, either, but now nobody could say for certain. What had happened to Roxy's father was, at

best, bad luck. That was all you could say about it. But whether luck was enough of an explanation for the people he left behind was another story entirely.

"It's been terribly hectic around here with funeral arrangements and other obligations, but as of this morning, I'm done with the preliminary duties and engagements. I inherited the estate, which makes me the official head of the Hart family."

Even under such trying, painful circumstances, Lady Roxy was doing the best she could. All I could do was bow my head. I hadn't even noticed. At changeover time on gatekeeping shifts, she looked no different from usual. There had been no way for me to know what she was going through behind the scenes.

And yet, with everything already keeping her so busy, she had still made time for me and invited me to the family manor. All I had done was fret about an interview with her father and think about how to hide my shortcomings. *Lady Roxy, I'm sorry. I...*

"Hey, don't look so glum," Lady Roxy said. "I need you to help me bring some light back to the Hart family. Will you assist me?"

"Yes. It would be my honor."

On that day, I became a servant of the house of Hart.

## Chapter 7: Drowning in Hunger

**I**T HAD BEEN almost a week since I started living at Hart Manor as a family servant. When I first came to the manor, I'd made the horrible mistake of being caught muttering in conversation with my sword, which made me seem more than a little creepy. Fortunately, the Hart family servants were good people, and they accepted both me and my eccentricities.

The following days were peaceful, if hectic. There was so much for me to remember in my new role that I didn't have a free moment to leave the manor. Cooking, washing, cleaning; I did whatever I was asked and gave up my days off to throw myself into learning the ropes.

The job I took to best was gardening. Working on Hart Manor's enormous lawns required patience and diligence. The weeding was endless, and the grass was required to be a particular height at all times. Thanks to the help of the three head gardeners, I started to get the hang of it. If I improved enough, they said I'd be working on the garden's trees next. Pruning the enormous trees at the front gate was something I was really looking forward to, and it felt good to work for people who needed help. It felt meaningful.

At the end of a day's work, all the servants met to eat dinner. The meals even had meat in them, and the first time I held a plate with meat on it, my hands shook in surprise and excitement. I had never imagined I would be able to eat meat again so soon after I treated myself to my post-hunt extravagance. Thanks to the regular meals at Hart Manor, I even put a little weight on my once skeletal frame.

Occasionally, when Lady Roxy returned from her duties outside the manor, she would take time to talk with me over tea. I didn't actually know how to have a conversation with a holy knight, or even the sorts of things holy knights liked to talk about, so usually Lady Roxy did most of the work. Still, as long as she seemed happy, I was happy to play my role, too.

Compared to working as a gatekeeper for Rafale, the difference was like heaven and earth. Or, if working for Lady Roxy was heaven, then being Rafale's employee was closer to working in hell.

But despite the happiness of my new work, my body was racked with pain. My stomach was eternally empty, and I felt a hunger I couldn't satisfy. It was a feeling of starvation.

And it ached.

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"Fay, are you all right?"

Lady Roxy placed her teacup on its tray and looked at me with worry in her eyes. Teatime for just the two of us had become routine, and it was the only time she called me Fay.

Nobody had called me Fay since my father, so I was a bit shy about the nickname. At the same time, when your boss wants to call you Fay, there isn't much you can do but let them. I had already asked Greed about it, but his response was little more than a chuckle, followed by, *"I could care less. Make up your own mind."*

In any case, Roxy continued calling me Fay, and I continued to feel kind of awkward about it.

"It's nothing, Lady Roxy," I replied.

I was hurting, both from hiding my hunger and hiding my feelings from Roxy.

"Are you sure? You don't look well."

Lady Roxy must have thought my unusual hunger was a cold, because she reached a hand toward my forehead. However, I brushed her off. Any touch would set off my Telepathy skill, and I didn't want to read her heart without her permission.

"I'm fine!" I said. "Really. I'm fine."

I stood up to leave, but the hunger sent me reeling with waves of dizziness. My consciousness seemed to stretch into the distance, and I collapsed to the floor. The hunger had never been worse. It felt like Gluttony was eating me from the inside out, and my vision was swallowed by darkness. For a time, I heard the faint cry of Lady Roxy calling my name.

Then I heard nothing at all.

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When I woke, I was in my room at the manor. I had been laid upon a mattress of soft cotton. It was a far cry from the straw bed I was used to. I must have passed out at teatime with Lady Roxy. The hunger of my Gluttony was getting too much to handle. For now, though, the aching had subsided, and I felt a little better.

It was night outside, and judging by the height of the moon, it was late. Starlight shone upon a note that had been left on a shelf.

*"Please take tomorrow off and make sure to get some rest. From, Roxy."*

She had to be worried, but I guessed that was natural; I'd collapsed in front of her. I would have to make sure I apologized the next time we met. She went out of her way to make time for tea, and I'd ruined it. I let out a sigh, sat up, and took Greed in hand.

"It's like I'm getting hungrier every day," I said. "I could tolerate it before, but it's never been this bad."

*Greed laughed loudly. "It's too late now. The die has been cast."*

"What do you mean?"

*"When Gluttony learns the taste of a soul, it only ever hungers for more. It will forever urge you to eat, and to feed."*

So the unusual hunger I felt meant I was, in fact, in a starvation state. Gluttony had seemed like a godsend at first, but now I knew it didn't come without cost.

*"Your hunger will only worsen. The more you eat, the more your appetite will grow. That's the peculiar thing about your skill. Until the day you die, your fate is to eat and to grow stronger. If you cannot, you will either starve to death, or you will lose yourself to the hunger and attack whatever, or whomever, stands before you."*

*"That...that can't be..."*

If I couldn't manage this ravening hunger, then I would die of it, or... The alternative was terrifying. It would make me a monster. If I had lost control of myself during tea, and if I had lashed out at Lady Roxy as a result... I shuddered to think of it.

*"Let me tell you something interesting. When you reach your limit, it shows in your eyes. Take a look at yourself."*

I stared into the large mirror in my room. Deep-red irises stared back at me, so red I didn't want to see them. My once black eyes had been stained the color of blood.

*"You've hit the limits of your hunger, Fate. You can carry on with your happy little servant life, but do not forget your obligation to yourself. Like I said: the die has been cast."*

Against my will, Gluttony hungered for souls. It was a desire that could not be quenched with water and could not be satisfied by food. To sate this urge, I had only one choice: to sink as deep as I had to in order to give it what it craved. I didn't want to give up the peaceful life I had just discovered, but if I was at my limit, I had to go.

I dressed by the light of the moon, took Greed in hand, and left Hart Manor.

It was time to satisfy my hunger.



## Chapter 8: Starvation Boost

I RAN DOWN the main street of the Holy Knight District and arrived at the large gate that separated that district from the others. In my current state of starvation, my five senses were sharpened to an unbelievable degree. I realized that though it was the dead of night, I could see as though it were the middle of the day.

My sense of smell was also heightened, and I could identify delicious opportunities by their scent. At the gate were two guards, and the one on the right was in better shape and seemed tastier. I used Identify to confirm my suspicions, and I was right; the more luscious guard had the better stats and skills.

In other words, I could identify a person with powerful stats and skills by their mouthwatering scent. It seemed that, in its hunger for souls, Gluttony gave my basic physical abilities a boost. However, it was excruciating. The hunger came in surges that left me reeling.

I needed to get through the gate quickly without the guards stopping me. Fortunately, I had a travel pass because I was now a servant of the Hart family. Travel passes were a rule; whether you were coming or going, you had to show yours to the guard at the gate to get by. If you lost the pass, the guards wouldn't let you through.

"Don't mind me," I said, smiling politely as I neared the guards. "Just out for a moonlight stroll."

I tried my best not to look suspicious. After all, it was the middle of the night, and I was trying to leave the Holy Knight District. However, as I pulled out my travel pass to show the guard, he recoiled and took a step backward.

"Ah!"

His face contorted in fear as he stared at me, and his partner was no different. Upon facing me to see what was going on, he reacted in exactly the same way. It was all incredibly awkward, so I waved my travel pass at them and rushed through the gate to the Merchant District as rapidly as I could.

*"When those guards looked into your eyes," said Greed, "they felt like little frogs caught by the glare of a snake. Your red eyes carry a predator's power. Anyone with lower stats will be paralyzed in fear. You see, when Gluttony starves, this temporary boost makes souls easier to eat."*





"Do you think they'll suspect anything? The guards back there?"

*"It was likely the first time they'd seen such a thing as you. All they know is that someone terrifying came by, but they are less than aware of what happened. If you have lost your red eyes by the time you return, they'll imagine you were a bad dream, or perhaps a figment of their tired minds. But if you show them your worry in your body language, then they will suspect you of foul play."*

There was logic to Greed's words. We strode through the Merchant District, where I noticed a sweet scent in the air. It was a most delectable fragrance. Giving in to temptation, I took a detour and followed the scent into a side street, searching through the shadows for its source.

At the end of one of those distant streets, I spotted three figures in black hooded robes. I tried to use Identify to analyze them, but they were too far out of range. Then I saw one of their faces in a sliver of moonlight.

My breath caught.

*What are they doing here at this hour?*

But there was no mistaking it. I would've recognized those poisonous features anywhere. Rafale. That meant the taller hooded figure was Hado, and the smaller one was their younger sister, Memil. None of them noticed me as they headed inside one of the Merchant District's most high-end shops.

It was the kind of prestigious place that only high-ranking people like holy knights could enter. I watched from the shadows as another group in black hooded robes went in. I knew from their ambrosial scent that they were also holy knights. I had an increasingly bad feeling.

What kind of meeting were they holding in the middle of the night? Whatever it was, if they needed to hide it from public view, then I didn't think it could be anything good. I kept watch over the shop for a time, but I couldn't tell what was happening inside because all the curtains were shut.

Besides, I was starving. My stomach rumbled with that other hunger. I burned with curiosity, but I had other reasons for being out tonight, and those reasons would not wait. It was unfortunate, but my hunger was getting even worse.

I turned and left the alleyway.

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The large gate leading out of the Merchant District was a pale reflection of itself at night. The usually bustling street was enveloped in silence, empty of the horses and carts that filled it. In their place, a group of adventurers had gathered.

A glance at their equipment told me everything; these were seasoned veterans. Their ranks and stats were much higher than the adventurers I had seen on my first goblin hunt. I felt it in the weight of their auras.

*"They're here for the night hunt," said Greed. "The moon is bright tonight, which means improved visibility. On top of that, monsters have to sleep, too. That means adventurers can kill large numbers of the same*

*monster type while they slumber without incurring as much hate as during the day."*

"Ah, I see."

Greed's explanations were ever helpful. No ordinary adventurer went hunting at night, but for the experienced and skilled, night hunts were an effective way to make a lot of money.

When I tried to cut past the group, a scruffy adventurer caught sight of me.

"Hey, you," he said. "I haven't seen you before. You seriously hunting in *that* armor?"

"Yes."

The man's laughter echoed down the street. Clearly, he didn't care who might be trying to sleep.

"Guys, listen to this. We've got a real hopeless case over here!"

I didn't want to draw attention to myself, but I was now surrounded by a group of hardened adventurers, grinning down at me as though I were nothing.

"You must be pretty strong, coming down all cool and casual dressed like that."

The words said one thing, but the tone of his voice said another. He was making fun of me. He may as well have said what he was clearly thinking: *What's a piece of garbage like you doing in a place like this?*

"What level are you?" he said. "Go on, tell us. Promise we won't laugh."

"Get out of my way," I said. "I'm in a hurry."

I ignored them and left. My hunger was at its limit, but none of the adventurers even flinched at my red eyes. I didn't need to bother with Identify to know what that meant; their stats were higher than mine.

As I left the gate, the adventurers called out to me from afar.

"You hear that? If he can't say his level, must mean it's low! Rookies like that always bite off more than they can chew!"

"You think maybe he wanted to join our party? You think that was it?"

"Probably. Not even in his dreams!"

"Hey, garbage boy! Come back. Maybe if you're lucky some party will take pity on you and let you carry their equipment!"

"Not us, though!"

"You said it! Ha ha!"

They could say whatever they liked. Thanks to Gluttony, I couldn't join a party even if I wanted. So I would do things my way, and I would become stronger than all of them.

## Chapter 9: A Feast

I STALKED THE GOBLIN GRASSLANDS by night, running through the grass. The second I found a goblin asleep amongst the reeds, I lopped its head off.

***Gluttony Skill activated. Stats increased: Vitality +30, Strength +40, Magic +10, Spirit +10, Agility +30***

I heard the metallic voice I had heard many times before. But it wasn't enough. I needed more. These piddling goblins weren't going to satisfy my hunger. However, I had run all the way here from the kingdom, so I took a moment to catch my breath.

Not a cloud crossed the night sky, and a full moon hung in the middle of it, shining its light on the goblin I had just slaughtered. On a regular hunt, adventurers took the ears of these goblins to cash in for rewards. My hunger didn't afford me the luxury of time to harvest, so when I caught my breath, I stepped over the dead goblin in search of my next prey.

Footsteps sprinted through the grass, following me, except they weren't just coming from behind. They were all around, from the front and sides, trampling the grass as they neared. Many, many. So many.

It seemed my prior hunt had been something of a small ecological disaster for these goblins. Those who had not yet been slain knew I was a dire threat to them all, and so they banded together to get rid of me.

I felt their gazes as I took position at a section of low grass and stood in place. Little by little, their footsteps came to a halt. My gaze flitted between the goblins now surrounding me. There were around fifty, but it could have been more. With my vision heightened, I saw their every move.

With Greed in hand, the goblins' swords and shields would split under my blade. Even if they called for reinforcements and launched themselves at me in the vast numbers they were known for, in my starvation state, these goblins were nothing.

Under the weight of my red-eyed gaze, the low-level goblins froze. I swung my stare, holding each goblin in place as I stalked and evaluated them one by one. A few goblins realized something strange was going on and tried to run, but by then, it was too late.

They had intended to surround, crowd, and kill me, but by coming so close together, they had only made my hunt simpler. I slaughtered them down to the last, and the final monster fell into the pile with all the others.

***Gluttony skill activated. Stats increased: Vitality +40, Strength +20, Magic +10, Spirit +10, Agility +10***

A calm fell. I looked into Greed's polished black blade at my own reflection.

My eyes were still red.

"I've consumed no small number of souls," I murmured, "but I'm still hungry."

I had killed more than a hundred goblins, and yet still I was famished. "How long will it take?" I asked. "How many to satisfy the hunger?"

*"Hm. At this rate, it seems goblins won't meet your appetite. You must turn your sights to something more powerful. Say, a hobgoblin."*

At Greed's suggestion, I left the grasslands and headed into the western forest, known as Hobgoblin Forest. It was said that when goblins developed enough power, they evolved into hobgoblins, at which point they took up new lives among the trees.

There were three hobgoblin types: fighters, guards, and archers. I could handle the fighters and guards in much the same way as I handled their lower level goblin counterparts. The problem would be the archers. They were fewer in number, but they attacked from a distance, letting loose arrows as they hid in the brush. What made them truly problematic was that they covered their arrowheads in their own fecal waste. A hit from those arrows was toxic. They were extremely dangerous, and though Seifort's adventurers called these archers "shitslingers," they did so in fear.

I had learned all this from an old servant at Hart Manor who, in his prime, had been an adventurer. At dinner, he often regaled me with tall tales and exaggerated stories of his past adventures, but I enjoyed them all the same. As I cautiously entered the forest, I realized I owed him thanks.

Hobgoblins were like regular goblins in that they weren't nocturnal, so as long as I didn't make too much noise, they would go on sleeping. Like the regular goblins before them, I could kill them as they slept.

I found one hobgoblin slumped against a big tree, sound asleep. It stood about the same height as I did, but unlike me, it was thick-waisted and muscled all over. It was difficult to make out its color in the darkness, but I could tell it was the murky green of a higher level goblin.

I used Identify.

***Hobgoblin Fighter, Lv 12***

***Vitality: 230***

***Strength: 340***

***Magic: 110***

***Spirit: 110***

***Agility: 230***

***Skill: Two-Handed Sword Technique***

A hobgoblin fighter. That explained the giant sword by its feet, which it surely used in battle. The monster also had the perfect skill to go with the weapon. However, its stats were nothing for me to worry about.

As I edged closer, I noticed another hobgoblin on the other side of the tree. I knew it by the shield planted on the ground by its side, but still I used Identify, just to be certain.

***Hobgoblin Guard, Lv 12***

***Vitality: 440***

***Strength: 220***

***Magic: 110***

***Spirit: 110***

***Agility: 110***

***Skill: Vitality Boost (Medium)***

Vitality Boost. Medium. That confirmed my hypothesis from earlier: status boosts had levels. If there was a “low” and a “medium,” that meant somewhere in the world was a “high.”

I took the head of the hobgoblin guard first. The monster was so deep in slumber that it died just like that. Not a worry in the world.

***Gluttony skill activated. Stats increased: Vitality +440, Strength +220, Magic +110, Spirit +110, Agility +110. New skill added: Vitality Boost (Medium)***

I turned toward the remaining hobgoblin to find it had woken, alerted by the sound of its companion’s beheading. The monster opened its mouth to call for reinforcements. I plunged Greed deep into the hobgoblin’s throat, straight through its mouth.

***Gluttony skill activated. Stats increased: Vitality +230, Strength +340, Magic +110, Spirit +110, Agility +230. Skill added: Two-Handed Sword Technique***

The difference was instantly clear; hobgoblins answered my hunger more deeply than their lower level counterparts. If I had known that earlier, I would have skipped the grasslands and come here directly.

Even still, I ravened.

I used Identify to analyze my current stats.

***Fate Graphite, Lv 1***

***Vitality: 8,041***

***Strength: 8,011***

***Magic: 2,501***

***Spirit: 2,501***

***Agility: 5,591***

***Skills: Gluttony, Identify, Telepathy, Conceal, One-Handed Sword Technique, Two-Handed Sword Technique, Strength Boost (Low), Vitality Boost (Low), Vitality Boost (Medium)***

I pressed into the forest in search of my next prey. The night was young.



## Chapter 10: The First Level

**S**O PEACEFULLY ASLEEP one minute, and so dead the very next. With the edge of the black sword Greed, I said goodnight and goodbye to the life of another hobgoblin.

***Gluttony skill activated. Stats increased: Vitality +440, Strength +220, Magic +110, Spirit +110, Agility +110***

After the forty-fifth dead hobgoblin, my body suddenly felt quenched of its thirst. Little by little, my uncontrollable urge to devour and eat subsided, then vanished. I was at last released from my starvation. I gasped with relief and sagged against a tree in the somber darkness of the forest.

*"Fate, if you mean to take a break, do it up in the branches of this tree," said Greed. "There may yet be a few hobgoblins wandering the wood. Now that you've freed yourself of your starvation state, you've lost the boost to your senses, so no more heightened smell, and no more seeing in the dark."*

"Good point," I said as I began to climb. I perched on a large branch. "I should be fine if I hide up here. But I'm surprised; I had to kill so many monsters before they even touched my hunger..."

*"Indeed you did. Depending on how long you wait, the starvation may madden you. You may lash out at any and everyone. It will not be so easily appeased. If you do not wish for that to happen, you must make a habit of hunting monsters and feeding their souls to your Gluttony."*

"I'll make sure I do," I said. "I don't want to feel like this ever again."

I stretched out along the big branch and tried to rest. Moonlight filtered through gaps in the leaves above. The forest was a moist, damp place, and a little chilly too, but it felt just right for my body, weary as it was from all the hunting.

Below me, I caught sight of the occasional hobgoblin passing by. Hobgoblins weren't known to be nocturnal, but some of them still patrolled. I was glad I'd listened to Greed.

Just as I was about to climb down and head back, the ground trembled through the tree, as if something big was approaching. Footsteps, and they grew heavier as a hulking goblin came into view. It was at least two times taller than me, with a blue-green color to its skin. In its hand, it carried an unwieldy club that looked as though it had been carved from one of the forest's enormous trees.

"What?!"

By the light of the moon, I saw flesh and blood stuck in clumps along the goblin's club, and I recoiled instinctively. But what the goblin held in its other hand made me even sicker. Though I didn't know exactly what the body had looked like before the goblin's club pounded it to death, the mangled shape was definitely human.

None of the regular townsfolk ever came to Hobgoblin Forest in the middle of the night. That meant the dead body dangling in the goblin's hands likely belonged to one of the adventurers I met at the gate in the Merchant District. For all their big talk, in the end, they were little more than goblin fodder.

However, even if they had ended up goblin bait, those adventurers had been experienced. They knew the dangers of night hunts. To have killed one—or all—of them, the huge goblin must have been formidable. As it passed beneath the tree I was hiding in, I took the opportunity to analyze it with Identify.

**Goblin King, Lv 30**

**Vitality: 21,000**

**Strength: 24,000**

**Magic: 5,230**

**Spirit: 4,560**

**Agility: 11,200**

**Skill: Health Regen**

A goblin king?! So that was what they looked like. I'd heard about them from a fellow servant at Hart Manor. In these parts, goblin kings were basically like bosses of the goblins, and they were frighteningly tough. Only a few of them resided in the forest, and their encounter rate was extremely low. If you happened upon one, you went into that battle prepared for death. They were nothing compared to holy knights, but a regular adventurer was looking at a potential one-hit kill.

Even just going by stats, the goblin king was on an entirely different level from the hobgoblins. I used Identify to further analyze Health Regen.

**Health Regen: Wounds heal automatically over time. Does not work on fatal injuries.**

*Damn, now there's a fantastic skill . With that, I could keep on fighting even if I got hurt. I want it...!*

With my current stats, fighting the goblin king wasn't an *impossible* task. While I worried about whether to take the risk, the beast trudged deeper into the forest. It was a rare monster, and if I waited until I was stronger, I might never see one again. I made up my mind. I slid down from my tree, and I followed.

True to its name, the goblin king looked like it owned the land upon which it walked. Not a single hobgoblin remained in sight. They had fled at the sound of the king's footsteps.

The monster came to a stop at a hollowed-out section of the forest, where a small field of flowers surrounded a withered tree. It settled against the tree and placed its club on the ground. Then it began devouring the mangled adventurer. The disgusting sound of the beast's wet chewing echoed through the forest, and with it, the occasional crunch of bone under goblin teeth.

*"Why are you so scared?" Greed asked. "You know goblins do this."*

"But..."

*"You know what happens to people who are killed by monsters. They are eaten. Humans are a delicacy for such creatures. Especially human children."*

"That's enough! I get it. I know. This is... It's just my first time actually *seeing* it."

Yes, I knew. I knew monsters ate humans. But imagining it in my head and seeing it happen in front of me were two entirely different things. Witnessing an act so visceral was a greater shock than I expected. Still, I steeled my nerves and kept watching the goblin king, absorbed in its meal.

If I was going to take this king down, it made sense to attack from behind. Targeting an enemy's blind spot was just basic strategy, though there was nowhere to hide in this open field of flowers.

I moved from tree to tree, cover to cover, monitoring the goblin king until I reached a position directly behind it. The monster had its back to me, and the tree hid most of it from view. From where I now stood, I could see only its shoulder, poking out past the side of the tree.

*"Slow and steady from here," said Greed.*

"Yeah."

Moving carefully, I stepped into the field of flowers. As expected, the goblin king was still focused on its food. Anxiety made my heart beat rapidly in my chest, and I focused on keeping my breath calm and quiet. Eventually, I made it to the withered tree. The goblin king's wet chewing echoed in my ears.

*"Fate, now!"* Greed's signal came loud and clear through my Telepathy.

I brought the black sword's blade down onto the goblin king's jutting shoulder. With my first attack, I separated its log-sized arm from its body.

I loosened for a moment, thinking my preemptive strike a success, but Greed's voice snapped me back to attention.

*"He's not dead yet, Fate. Get back!"*

I dashed backward as the goblin king raised its club and brought it down through the withered tree. It crashed into the place where I had stood. The force of the swing sent the club deep into the earth, and rocks flew in every direction. A direct hit like that, and I would have been dead.

"That was close. Thanks."

*"Don't let your guard down yet. Here he comes!"*

The goblin king roared and raised its club high. Blood poured from the gaping wound that was once the monster's right arm.

*I was prepared to dodge the strike when Greed spoke. "Believe in me, Fate. A club like that is nothing to my strength."*

"In that case...!" I put my faith in Greed, stepped forward, and slashed with the black sword in a flash of light.

Greed's blade was sharp, and the goblin king's club toppled to the ground, cut off at the handle. But I couldn't let up from there. I leapt into

the air with Greed raised high above my head. The goblin king roared as it fell to its knees, and I amputated the monster's remaining hand.

Even broken and defeated, the goblin king glowered at me as I stabbed Greed into its face. I drove the sword deeper and deeper until I felt the disgusting pulp of flesh around my wrist, and then I drove deeper still. At last, I pulled the sword free and shook the fresh blood of the goblin king from the black blade.

***Gluttony skill activated. Stats increased: Vitality +21,000, Strength +24,000, Magic +5,230, Spirit +4,560, Agility +11,200. Skill added: Health Regen***

That had been a true battle with an enemy of equal level, more tense than any I had experienced before it. In the chaos of combat, the ever-present feeling that I could die at any moment had pulsed within me. Thus, winning came with a sense of accomplishment—of surviving, of emerging the victor—like nothing I had ever known. Was this the true pleasure of monster hunting?

The battle was won, and I fell to my knees, my body released from its nervous adrenaline.

*"You did well," Greed said. "And your stats grew nicely, meaning we can release my First Level."*

*"First Level?"*

*"My new form. Wielders of the black sword can grant it new forms in exchange for a stat sacrifice. So how about it? Want to try?"*

*"Just how much of a sacrifice are we talking here?"*

*"Our starting point was when you first picked me up. If you sacrifice all the stats you've earned since that point, you can awaken the First Level."*

In other words, after all the work I had done to get more powerful, I had to go all the way back to where I'd started in order to strengthen Greed. On top of that, I'd have to sacrifice even more stats to unlock the Second and Third Levels.

Then, however, Greed made it clear I had a choice...of sorts.

*"When my wielder attains a certain stat level, they must either awaken my First Level or relinquish their right to wield me."*

In other words, I made Greed stronger or I gave him up.

*"And I have to choose now...?"*

*"Yes. So long as you wield me, it is unavoidable, as with the hunger of your Gluttony."*

I asked Greed how much of my power he intended to take.

*"I am as greedy as my namesake, and I will take everything I can. Now make your decision. We grow stronger together, or you grow stronger alone. Make your choice! But let it be known: my higher levels will not disappoint."*

There was nothing else to weigh. Greed was my only partner, and if we grew stronger together, there was nobody I could trust more.

*"I understand. Do it."*

*"You won't regret it. Here we go!"*

It was as if my words had signed the contract. Greed began to glow. At the same time, I felt power draining from my body. As the glow faded, I found a black bow in my hands.

*"This is the form of the First Level. You may now wield me in two forms: the one-handed sword, and this black bow."*

I used Identify to check my stats. As expected, after sacrificing all the stats I'd earned, I was now back to where I'd been when Greed and I first met.

***Fate Graphite, Lv 1***

***Vitality: 121***

***Strength: 151***

***Magic: 101***

***Spirit: 101***

***Agility: 131***

***Skills: Gluttony, Identify, Telepathy, Conceal, One-Handed Sword Technique, Two-Handed Sword Technique, Strength Boost (Low), Vitality Boost (Low), Vitality Boost (Medium), Health Regen***

However, my skills remained.

## Chapter 11: A Brief Respite

**T**HE SHAPE OF THE great black bow cast a graceful arc. Despite its hefty appearance, it was fairly light. Greed called this form the black bow.

"Hey, Greed. We don't have any arrows. Am I going to have to buy them?"

*"Unnecessary. This is a magic bow. It crafts arrows from magical energy. We also happen to have a perfect opportunity for you to try it out. A hobgoblin is aiming at you from those trees to your left."*

I turned to the left just as a filthy, stinking arrow flew past my face. If I hadn't moved, the literally shitty arrow would have killed me. *He could have told me earlier!*

Shitty arrows only meant one thing: a hobgoblin archer. Or, as the local adventurers called the dangerous creature, a shitslinger.

It seemed my battle with the goblin king had woken this one. Because it attacked from a distance, I couldn't engage the hobgoblin archer with a short-range weapon. To add insult to injury, any hit from this monster would weaken my stats.

This was a job for my new weapon, Greed's awakened power: the black bow.

I ran from the shitty arrows and took cover behind the goblin king's corpse.

"It's too dark. I can't work out where the archer is firing from," I said.

*"No problem. If you know your enemy's approximate location, the magic arrow will home in on it. It's safe and secure even for rookies. Just shoot the arrow and watch it fly."*

I'd never used a bow before, but it sounded like that wouldn't matter. I confirmed the arrows were coming from between two trees in the distance; the hobgoblin was likely hiding somewhere in that area. From over the top of the goblin king's corpse, I pulled the bowstring back. As I did, a black arrow formed and set itself upon the string.

*So these are the magical arrows Greed was talking about.*

Then, without properly aiming, I released the bowstring.







The arrow flew through the air, correcting its course in midair as it disappeared into the trees where the hobgoblin hid.

***Gluttony skill activated. Stats increased: Vitality +170, Strength +230, Magic +110, Spirit +110, Agility +350. Skill added: Night Vision***

The metallic voice echoed in my head. The hobgoblin was done for—and with so little effort. This bow was going to be extremely useful. As long as the arrows weren't somehow intercepted, I could fire a hundred shots and never miss a single one.

I had heard tales of magic-wielding monsters who attacked from long range. Closing in on them with only the black sword would've been like sticking my hand in a hornet's nest. But with the black bow, I could fight them. As long as I continued hunting solo, survival meant I would have to be versatile and learn to take multiple approaches myself. The more aces up my sleeve, the better.

It was also fortunate I'd absorbed the Night Vision skill from the fallen hobgoblin archer. With that, the nighttime scenery was once more as clear as it would've been under the noonday sun. This skill would make progress much smoother on my evening hunts.

My hunger satisfied, it was time to head home. As I took a last glance at the body of the dead goblin king, I had an idea. I lopped off both its ears. Since goblin kings were rare monsters, you could earn quite the sum for them at the trading post. If I took the ears to the trading post myself, it would draw too much attention, but if I passed them off to someone else in secret...like, say, as a donation to an orphanage...nobody would suspect a thing.

Specifically, I was thinking of the orphanage in the slum near my old hovel, the place where I'd brought the girl after I saved her from her kidnapper. I could stuff the goblin king's ears in a bag, write "donation" on it, and throw it through a broken window.

A gift from he who suffered from Gluttony—he who knew the true meaning of hunger.

With the money from those ears, the nuns could treat all the orphans to a feast. I bet that would make the girl I'd helped happy, too. Buoyed by that hope, I passed through Hobgoblin Forest and the Goblin Grasslands, onwards toward the Kingdom of Seifort.

I had work yet to do before the night was over.

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The morning sun rose. I returned quietly to Hart Manor and the bed in my room. I was utterly exhausted. In the end, my work took all night.

For starters, one of the orphanage nuns had almost caught me with the goblin king's ears, though somehow I managed to sneak away.

After that, I had headed to the high-end Merchant District shop I'd run across earlier. By the time I got there, Rafale and his siblings had apparently left, since the curtains in the windows were open. I was still

curious as to why so many holy knights had met in secret, so I decided to return another night. But first I'd need some sleep. Fortunately, Lady Roxy had given me the day off to do just that.

My exhausted body had been through the wringer: the hunger, the goblin hunting, and everything else that followed. I closed my eyes and was immediately swallowed by slumber.

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Knock-knock.

Someone was knocking at my door. I woke at the sound and was bowled over to see who entered. It was the first time she'd ever been in my room.

"How are you feeling?"

It was Lady Roxy. I glanced at the clock and realized it was past noon. I'd been asleep for quite some time. Roxy wore her white light armor, which meant she'd made time during work at the castle to come back and check on me. To think she went so far just to look after her servants... She truly was kind.

Luckily, I'd slept so well I had recovered from the night's activities.

"I'm much better," I said.

"I'm glad to hear it. But, please, don't overdo it. I brought you some fruit. Would you like to try some?" Lady Roxy took a plate from a basket she carried. It was full of luscious grapes larger than my thumbnail. "These are grown on the Hart family estate up north. They arrived at the manor this morning."

"They look amazing. Is the Hart family known for its vineyards?"

I had already heard from the other servants that the Harts' grapevines were famous, but it felt prudent to act like I didn't know. Lady Roxy had a look on her face like she was just aching for me to ask about it.

"It is! We are also well-known for our wine. The grapes served with the manor's meals are from our vineyards. They're absolutely beautiful. I plan to return to the estate in the near future. We can go together, if you like."

"Would that be okay?!"

*If the Hart family estate grows grapes this perfect, it must be a truly beautiful place.*

I wanted to see it myself. And if my master invited me, I couldn't refuse. We sat on my bed for a time, picking grapes from the plate, until another knock came at the door, followed by a voice.

"Lady Roxy, it's time you returned to your duties."

The voice belonged to a young woman—the most serious of Lady Roxy's servants, her secretary. She was the head servant and was quite kind, but she was strict about punctuality. I was always getting chewed out for my own lack of it. For her part, Lady Roxy hurriedly dabbed at her mouth with her handkerchief.

“Oh, I must get back to work. Help yourself to the rest of the grapes, okay? Bye!” She gave a shy, dainty wave and left.

Since inheriting her father’s responsibilities, Lady Roxy had been relentlessly busy. The head servant told me that among the five esteemed families of Seifort, Lady Roxy was officially the youngest family head. As such, her skills and level fell far short of her new peers’, and she encountered struggle after struggle.

It was the kind of hardship that came with being of the highest rank. A peasant like myself, with no authority or influence to speak of, lived in an entirely different world.

*If I could make it to those ranks somehow...* Could I ease Lady Roxy’s burdens? An impossible thought.

To chase away my feelings of helplessness, I decided to head to my old bar. It had been a while since I’d shown my face. I figured I should at least let the owner know I was alive. He probably thought I was dead of overwork from the Vlerick gatekeeping job. Besides, today was my day off. Maybe Lady Roxy would tell me off about it later, but I felt like I’d earned the right to a few drinks!

## Chapter 12: Rumors at the Bar

**I** GOT CHANGED and headed out, telling the other servants that I was feeling better and where I was going. They were good people, and they told me to go out and enjoy myself. They even promised to keep it a secret from Lady Roxy.

I left the Holy Knight District for the Merchant District. It was just past noon, so I had time to kill before the bar opened. I couldn't do any *real* shopping, though. I still hadn't received payment for my work at Hart Manor, so I only had one silver and twenty copper coins to my name. I also needed to save some money for drinks. Therefore, I headed once more to the flea markets in the back alleys where I'd first found Greed.

Back then, in my dirty patchwork clothes, that arrogant shopkeeper hadn't even given me the time of day. Now that I was a servant for the Hart family, and dressed accordingly, nobody would treat me like a nuisance.

I passed from stall to stall, bargain hunting. Turned out Identify was extremely handy for just this kind of thing. I didn't even need a trained eye for quality; I could literally see any item's worth. With this, I thought maybe I could buy high-quality items on the cheap and resell them for profit... But then I realized that wouldn't work because I didn't have anywhere to sell anything, let alone customers.

Putting those thoughts aside, I took an elegant plate in hand and used Identify on it.

"Whoa, this is amazing!" I cried. "This guy did a fantastic job putting a broken plate back together. You can't even tell! Looks like the other plates are the same, too."

The owner of the stall glared my way. He'd been bartering with a customer right next to me. Seemed like the customer heard me too, because they shoved the plate they were going to buy right back at the shop owner in a rage. Then the two started arguing.

"You cheated me!"

"I didn't cheat anyone!"

It was...more than a little awkward, so I escaped back to the street before they roped me into the whole mess.

"Hoo boy. Almost got ourselves into some pretty hot water there."

*"You need to be more careful," Greed chided me. "Merchants hate people who walk around using Identify."*

"Why don't you tell off the dirty merchant cheating people with his lies?"

*"Ah, but truth doesn't always put food on the table. The ends may at times justify the means."*

This kind of dishonesty seemed common among struggling flea-market merchants. Anyway, I put that shop behind me and continued

digging through the stalls for bargains. Then I found something truly interesting on a shelf lined with hats and helmets. It was terrifying, but something about it drew me in. I took it in hand and used Identify.

### ***Skull Mask***

***Durability: 20***

***Hides the wearer's identity from others by making them appear as a stranger.***

*Now this could come in handy!*

*It seemed Greed agreed. "You've found something very special. This is an enchanted piece of equipment made for masquerades. It's an antique, but with a little magic, it'll still work."*

Forty copper coins. Not too expensive, either. I would need the mask for monster hunting. I'd soon be at it almost every night, and if I went maskless, adventurers would eventually be able to identify me. The ability to disguise myself would be critical to hiding who I was while I ate.

I gave forty copper coins to the old merchant at the stall, wrapped the mask in a rag, and tucked it in my shirt. I'd made a valuable find. Of course, in a kingdom the size of Seifort, rare items occasionally popped up at flea markets. It would be a good idea to make a habit of dropping by to look for the odd bargain.

In any case, it was time to head to the bar. Any longer in the markets, and I'd probably find something else to suck my money up.

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When I entered the local bar, I found it crowded with scruffy, unkempt men. What were they all doing drinking this early in the afternoon? The bar had always been empty at this time before. But stranger things had happened, so I headed over to my old corner at the counter.

My usual spot was the only seat still empty. On the counter in front of the seat I found a single flower in a cup. As I sat, I tried to work out what it was.

A voice called out to me. "Hey, you can't sit there. That spot belonged to one of our regulars, before he..."

It was the barkeep, who walked over, took a look at my face, and gasped.

"You're alive?! I was convinced you were dead!"

That explained the flower, then. The barkeep had taken my absence over the last week as a sign the Vlericks had finally done me in.

"Alive and well, as you can see," I said. "Is it all right if I sit here?"

"Of course, of course! Sit! Please!"

I moved the flower to the side and took my place. "Barkeep, a bottle of your finest wine and some food to match it, please."

"Hey, wait a second," he said. "One minute I think you're dead, and the next you come back rich. What's the story?"

"New job, my friend. That's why I was away; I was learning my new responsibilities."

"I see. Well, I'm glad. Really, I am."

The barkeep disappeared into the kitchen, wiping away a few tears as he went. He returned a short time later with a glass filled with wine and a huge fish in meuniere sauce.

"To celebrate your new job, you're eating half-price tonight!" he said.

"Are you sure?"

"Of course! Here's to the years we've known each other!"

I had no idea the barkeep felt so much camaraderie for me. It made me grateful I'd come. I dug into the fish and asked why the place was so packed.

"These guys are all adventurers," the barkeep said.

At first, I figured they all had the day off. The work of adventurers was different from regular jobs because they had to match their hunts to the behavior of monsters. Naturally, they worked irregular schedules. Sometimes monsters didn't come out if it was raining, and other times adventurers had to wait out a monster that was more violent than usual because it was in heat.

But it didn't seem like either of those things were going on today.

"The way I hear it, these adventurers went out for goblins this morning, and all they found was a graveyard," said the barkeep. "Goblin corpses scattered everywhere. All of them with their ears, too! Just left there on the ground! So these adventurers made a right profit just harvesting ears. It's a weird world, I tell you."

"Ah, is that so?" I said with a nervous laugh.

I'd almost spit out my wine. He was describing the consequences of my little adventure. It was okay, though, right? It wasn't like I'd done anything wrong.

"But you know what?" the barkeep said, his face gloomy.

"What?"

"Well, the problem is, what *did* kill those goblins? There's a good chance it was a stray monster that wandered in from another region."

"A stray monster?!"

The barkeep had heard this from the adventurers, too. They were, in effect, calling *me* a stray monster. It seemed my goblin-hunting expedition might have been less consequence-free than I'd hoped.

"Yeah, it happens once every ten years or so. That's why the holy knights have been called in. And I'm glad they have. Puts all the rest of us at ease, you know? At least it'll be over sooner or later."

Apparently, if an unknown monster showed up anywhere near the kingdom's roads, the traveling merchants and traders put their deliveries on hold; they didn't want to die, after all. As a result, the flow of goods and produce into the kingdom slowed, so prices went up, and managing a bar became much tougher.

This was my fault. Even so, I couldn't simply stop hunting. And now I'd have to deal with a holy knight on patrol—maybe worse.

"So which holy knight have they put in charge?" I asked.

"I heard it's one of them Vlericks you're so fond of. The middle child, Hado. He still doesn't have any battle experience in Galia, so they put him on this rookie-league investigation to help build his name."

At the mere mention of the Vlericks, I drove my fork into my fish. To think a holy knight from one of the esteemed families would stick his nose into my business... It felt a little like I'd jumped out of the frying pan and into the fire. I drained my glass of wine to cool my head.

"Actually, I heard another weird story recently," said the barkeep.

"And what was that?"

"You know that orphanage in the slums near your place? Some nuns there were up praying a bit before daybreak when a bloodstained bag flew straight through the window. Landed right in front of one of the nuns and she fainted on the spot. So at first, the nuns think it's some awful prank. They run outside, but whoever did it's already long gone."

*Wait, is he talking about...?*

The barkeep held his stomach and laughed. Oblivious to the tense look on my face, he went on.

"No, wait, there's more. So the nuns are furious, right? They're just appalled. And they go to throw the bag away when they notice what's written on the side. It says, 'a donation.' So nervously, cautiously, they open this bloody bag and find a pair of goblin-king ears! Suddenly, the nuns are crying with joy! I hear they're still looking for whoever gave them that gift."

And that...was also me. Without a doubt, that was me. I could only hope the girl at the orphanage got a good meal out of it. And now the sisters were searching for me, too, though that wouldn't be a problem so long as I didn't get caught. At least it would be easier now that I had the skull mask.

"That *is* a very interesting story," I said. "Now barkeep, another glass of wine, please!"

As long as I kept my cool, nobody would ever know a thing. So I drank my wine and ate my food.

And the food was delicious.

## Chapter 13: The Roxy Inspection

**A** FEW DAYS HAD PASSED since my visit to the bar, and I had grown used to my double life. By day I was a servant of the Hart family, and by night I hunted goblins to satiate my Gluttony with new souls.

At the same time, I was growing concerned about the movements of Rafale and his siblings. I staked out the high-end shop I saw them enter that one night numerous times, but Rafale didn't appear again, nor did the other holy knights. Perhaps their meeting place had changed. I had no idea what they were planning, but there was little more I could do than simply keep watch for now.

I could have told Lady Roxy about what I saw, but all I'd be able to tell her was that Rafale was doing something suspicious. That was information with little worth. She already knew the Vlericks were always up to no good; what mattered was uncovering exactly *what*.

After a few days of dithering, I came to a decision. No matter how much I fretted, I'd get nowhere trying to pull answers out of thin air. If I wanted information, I had to ask someone involved with the group.

Fortunately, it just so happened that—thanks to my hunting escapades in the Goblin Grasslands and Hobgoblin Forest—the Vlerick family's second son was himself hunting down the rampant monster responsible. So, dressed in my black hooded robes and skull mask, I became the rampant monster that was terrifying adventurers. In time, I thought, they might even come up with a name for me.

I mulled over how best to lure Hado Vlerick as I tended to the garden, doing my apprentice chores. It was a beautiful day, perfect weather for trimming the lawns. We hadn't been able to do anything the previous day because of rain, so we were trying to make up for it.

Since dawn, I'd been working on the lawns under the guidance of the head gardeners. Hart Manor's lawns were vast, and the grass was thick with life. In a mere few weeks, a given patch would grow bristly and unkempt, so our gardening location changed on a weekly rotation. This week was the south lawn, next week was the east, the week after that was the north... The work was never-ending.

I had a long road to walk before I could prune the manor's trees. By midday, the head gardeners had left me to my assigned tasks and returned to their own work, and I was alone. I silently continued trimming the lawns until I noticed a figure near the manor's back gate.

"Is that...is that who I think it is?"

It was. No doubt about it, the figure was definitely Lady Roxy. She was slipping out the back gate as if she didn't want to be seen. Her clothes were different from usual, too. Most of the time, Lady Roxy cut a gallant figure in her holy-knight armor, but today she was dressed just like any of



the town's young girls. What was she doing, looking like a commoner? I caught up to her as she slunk away.

"Have a nice day, Lady Roxy!" I said.

I had only meant to offer a polite greeting as a servant to his master, but Lady Roxy leapt into the air with a squeal of shock. She turned and sighed with relief when she realized it was me.

"Ah! You gave me such a fright, Fay!" Her cheeks puffed up in a pout.

"What are you doing, Lady Roxy? You look a bit...different..."

"These are... Well, sometimes I just want to relax...! Wait. No. This is for a top secret inspection. Sometimes, I dress like an ordinary girl so I can study how regular people live up close."

Wow. It was just like Lady Roxy to come up with a brilliant scheme like that. No other holy knight would ever do such a thing. She really was unique.

"That's a wonderful idea. Well, I don't want to get in your way, so I'll head back to work. Enjoy your day!"

I tried to return to the lawns, but Lady Roxy ordered me to stop. Well, more precisely, she came up behind me and grabbed hold of my collar.

"Fay, wait! I've just had another wonderful idea."





Lady Roxy might have said “wonderful,” but she also looked like a kid who just came up with a fantastic prank. I was a little dubious about the wonderfulness-quotient of this idea of hers.

“Uh...yes, Lady Roxy?”

She struck a puzzling, coquettish pose and said, “Hee hee! It’s top secret. I’m giving you a top-secret mission, Fay!”

“Whaaaat?”

Lady Roxy looked alarmingly cute, even though she clearly didn’t use this pose often. Still, I was speechless. A secret mission from a holy knight?! Was I even capable of that?! I could barely trim grass.

Seeing my bewilderment, Lady Roxy once again struck her pose and spoke. “You’ll join me on my inspection of the people! You will use your skills and expertise to be my escort!”

In my heart, I heard my previous response echo. *Whaaaat?*

Could I do that? Could I escort a woman? I’d never done anything remotely comparable since the day I was born. And when I remembered it was Lady Roxy I’d be escorting... The difficulty level was way too high! I didn’t think I could go on living if I failed to meet her expectations. I froze in place, unable to reply.

Lady Roxy grabbed my hand impatiently. “Well, let’s go. If we stay here much longer, we’ll most certainly be spotted.”

“Please, wait. I still have my duties... The head gardeners will be upset if I shirk my responsibilities.”

“That won’t be an issue. I’ll come up with a reason to cover for you later, *and* I’ll tell them myself. See? Problem solved!”

This townspeople version of Lady Roxy was awfully pushy, especially with how she intended to entangle me in her plans.

*But wait, is this just how strongly she feels about getting to know the reality of the kingdom’s people? If that’s the case, my job is to do everything I can to support her.*

Yes! I would help her understand the lives of the common people so she might use that knowledge to better protect them.

“I understand, Lady Roxy. I’ll...I’ll do my best!”

“Really?! Oh, this is going to be so much fun! Let’s go!”

“Okay!”

We left through the back gate, proceeding carefully so as not to be spotted. Lady Roxy moved like a real pro. I got the feeling this wasn’t her first such excursion.

“Lady Roxy,” I said. “Do you do this kind of thing often?”

“Uh... I... Nooo. No, I don’t do it *that* often.”

“Really?”

What would the other servants think if they knew Lady Roxy regularly disguised herself as an everyday commoner and went out on these so-called “inspections”? She was the head of the house of Hart. There had to be issues with anyone of her rank doing such things.

As if sensing my concern, Lady Roxy looked at me sternly. "Fay, you can't tell anybody about this. Not a soul. Especially not...*her*."

"Her...? Ohhh. Okay, I understand."

She was talking about the head servant who managed the household staff, the young woman who doubled as her secretary. Someone so serious and earnest would be furious to find Lady Roxy leaving the manor dressed like an ordinary person. She would absolutely attempt to put a stop to it.

"Yeah," I said. "If *she* found out, she'd probably say something like, 'Please, my lady, attend to the standards of your position!'" I pretended to push a pair of glasses up the bridge of my nose, something the head servant did all the time.

Lady Roxy covered her mouth and let out a laugh. "Stop those impressions immediately! We'll give away our position!"

"Sorry, Lady Roxy, I guess I got a bit carried away."

"It's fine. Now, let's get out of the Holy Knight District. The sooner the better."

We kept moving, sneaking as we went. Suddenly, Lady Roxy pulled me into a small alleyway. She drew me into a tight embrace; thanks to her overwhelming stats, I was trapped in her clutches. I couldn't move a muscle. On top of that, with our skin touching, my Telepathy kicked in.

*"He's...he's still struggling. I'll have to hold him tighter."*

What did she plan to do to me in the shadows of this alleyway?!

"Fay, be quiet," Lady Roxy said, cutting off my addled thoughts. "The manor's maids are coming this way."

I looked where Lady Roxy nodded. Two young maids chatted as they strolled in our direction. I hadn't even noticed them. Admittedly, I was a tad overexcited; I was on a secret, two-person mission with Lady Roxy, whom I admired and looked up to. Who wouldn't have been thrilled? But this mission was an important responsibility, so I focused up and watched the maids pass by. If I couldn't overcome my stray thoughts, we'd never complete our mission.

"Uh...Lady Roxy? I think you can let me go now."

"What? Already?"

*"What a pity. But who's a good boy? Fay's a good boy!"*

With that, Lady Roxy gently rubbed my head, even though she didn't need to hold me any longer. The maids had entered the manor by now. This was unnecessary! Finally, my unspoken request seemed to reach Lady Roxy, and she released me with a dissatisfied pout.

"Fine, fine. There you go," she said with a hint of annoyance as she walked on ahead.

Had I done something wrong? I ran after her. "Lady Roxy, wait!"

Something about her today was so different from usual.

"Okay," Lady Roxy said. "Stop that right now!"

"What is it, Lady Roxy? What's wrong? Lady Roxy?"

"That! Stop that! Stop it! If you keep calling me 'Lady Roxy,' you'll blow our cover!"

"Oh. Ohhh."

My first blunder! Lady Roxy had gone to all this trouble to disguise herself, but if I called her by her name and title, it would all be for nothing. In that case...how was I supposed to address her?

"Okay, okay," she added. "Stop looking at me like some kind of lost puppy! You can call me...Lexie! And none of that 'Lady' business, either. So no 'Lady Lexie.' Right now, I'm just another regular girl."

She spoke with such confidence and power. I'd never seen a "regular girl" with her grand aura of dignity. I wondered whether I should say something about that but thought better of it. Lady Roxy was so animated; I hadn't seen her like this in so long. Since inheriting her father's post, she'd been worked to the bone. With my support today, I dared to hope she could find a more genuine calm.

However, Lady Roxy's gaze—which clearly wanted something from me—interrupted my thoughts. Did she want me to call her by her new name? Yes, that had to be it.

"Shall we head off then, uh...Lexie?"

"Of course."

So this was what Lady Roxy meant by "being her escort." We had just left, but I had a feeling my difficulties were only beginning. Would I make it out of this one alive? I was worried to the bone, out of my mind with anxiety. Even with that uncertainty in my heart, my legs kept walking me forward alongside Lady Roxy.

Together, we headed toward the gate that would take us out of the Holy Knight District and into the Merchant District.

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The gatekeeper studied our faces. "Travel passes, please."

*Oh no*. I'd left my travel pass in my room at the manor. Would I have to go back and get it?

Then Lady Roxy pulled a piece of paper from her pouch and showed it to the gatekeeper. Upon seeing it, he dropped to one knee.

*Whoa! That's an effective paper!*

From what I could gather, Lady Roxy didn't carry an ordinary travel pass. Mine would never have garnered that kind of reaction.

"Let's go, Fay. Quickly now!"

"Oh, yes. Of course."

It seemed Lady Roxy's travel pass allowed me through the gate, too, even though I wasn't carrying my papers. After I'd passed through and caught up to Lady Roxy, I surreptitiously asked her about it.

"This is the highest level of travel pass," Lady Roxy declared proudly. "Anyone who carries one is treated the same as a holy knight. Impressive, no?"

It was indeed impressive, without a doubt, but...didn't it also give away Roxy's rank? Weren't we on a top secret mission? Even so...

"You're amazing, Lexie. I almost can't believe your pass has that much power."

"Right?"

We entered the Merchant District and assessed the area.

"Fay, let's put your escort skills to use."

"Yes, of course. We'll start by exploring the Merchant District."

To be honest, I hadn't thought of exactly where to escort Lady Roxy. Still, even without a destination, I didn't think it was a bad idea to simply stroll around. All my escort duty really meant was taking her around until she pointed out things that interested her. That felt more in line with Roxy's idea of an inspection than me trying to play tour guide.

However, Lady Roxy didn't move as fast as I expected. She strode with the dignity of her position, which was likely a habit she'd developed when she learned to walk. Furthermore, because holy knights were the kingdom's highest ranked individuals, wherever they went, people got out of their way. But when the Merchant District was especially packed—like it was today—on the main streets you practically had to push and elbow your way through all the people. Lady Roxy's stately gait primed her for imminent collision.

"I've walked this street so many times, but I just can't get used to all the people," Lady Roxy said. "Today there are even more than usual. Even if we're careful, we'll never get through."

"In that case, allow me to lead the way."

"Are you sure?"

"Of course. I'm your escort, aren't I?"

"How very reliable!"

Of course, now that I'd said it, I actually had to do it. With my stats, though, I wouldn't get knocked over. We could push through the crowd without sending anyone flying. Lady Roxy placed a hand on my shoulder as we went, and her thoughts flowed into me.

*"Go, Fay! Go! This is fun! Go forth, and the path shall open!"*

We bulled into the most bustling section of the street. It was tough work keeping an eye on Lady Roxy as we pushed through the crowds, but it brought me a special pleasure to see how much she was enjoying herself. The effort was worth it for her satisfaction, which I could hear in her thoughts.

*"Oh, what's that?"*

At that, Lady Roxy's thoughts vanished as her hand fell from my shoulder. Something had caught her attention. But I was glad; all that listening in on her thoughts made me feel kind of awkward.

"Fay, come over and look at this! Quickly!"

"Oh, wow."

In front of us were a variety of beautiful stones placed along a table. The jeweler had set up a stall in front of their shop. These weren't the high-quality gems you'd find inside, but a collection of modestly priced stones the townsfolk could afford. However, the stones started at one silver coin, so they were certainly expensive as far as I was concerned.

Lady Roxy's eyes lit up as she took in the brilliant gems. However, I'd never seen her wearing any jewelry. The only enduring image of Lady Roxy in my head was that of her in her white light armor, her holy sword at the ready. The Lady Roxy I knew adorned herself in nothing more.

*But perhaps that's not how she sees herself*, I thought as I watched her with the stones.

"I'm a girl too, you know," Lady Roxy said, a little embarrassed. "I'm allowed to show interest in this kind of thing!"

She must have felt the weight of my gaze. But this version of her, who took these beautiful stones in hand to admire them, was new to me. I had always thought of Lady Roxy as somebody who lived and breathed by the way of the holy knight, but at this moment, she struck me as no different from any other young girl. Perhaps who she was during the day was a role she *forced* herself to play. I hoped I was overthinking it.

Roxy smiled at me then, and my worries dissipated. "This place is wonderful. Well, shall we move on?"

"Oh? You won't buy anything?"

"I don't need to."

Wondering whether that was really the case, I called out to Lady Roxy as she began to leave. All I had in my pockets were ten copper coins. But what did I have to lose? I clenched the coins in my fist and looked at the girl behind the stall.

"Can I buy anything with these?" I asked.

The girl looked a little unsure of what to say, but then she clapped her hands like she had an idea. She disappeared inside the shop and returned with a wooden box in which there were ten rocks, each about the size of a fist.

"Our jewels come from these pieces of ore," she said. "We break them open to find gems. Sometimes there's one inside, and sometimes there isn't. You can have one for your ten coins. How does that sound?"

The girl was being generous, but it didn't seem like a good gift for Lady Roxy. If the ore was empty, I would have essentially bought her a rock. I felt bad because the girl had really gone out of her way for me, but I needed to turn her down. I opened my mouth to say so when I noticed the joy on Lady Roxy's face.

"Are...you going to buy one of those for me?"

"I...I know it's not much, but...it'd be a token of my thanks. You know, for saving me from Rafasshole that time."



"No, I'm really happy! Which one should I choose...?" Lady Roxy looked contemplative. "You know, I think it would be better if you picked for me, Fay."

The pressure of sudden responsibility was astronomical. Lady Roxy was asking me to pick a jewel out of ten rocks! And there was no guarantee I'd even get one with anything worthwhile inside. All I had to rely on was my luck.

*Hm...this one!*

I selected a rock. Compared to the others, it was neither too big nor too small.

"This one, please."

"Are you sure? You can still change your mind, if you like."

I really wished the shopgirl hadn't said that. I'd finally made up my mind, and now she was knocking the supports out from under my confidence. I had a feeling she was getting a real kick out of my predicament, too.

*Wait. Of course!*

I was so high up on cloud nine from just hanging out with Lady Roxy that I'd forgotten I had Identify. I could use it to solve the whole dilemma in a heartbeat. To start, I analyzed the piece of ore I'd just passed to the girl. It seemed as though lady luck had indeed smiled upon me.

"Yes," I said. "That's the rock I want."

"Okay, that'll be ten copper coins. I hope you find something pretty."

I paid and took the piece of ore in hand. I wasn't sure what to do. Maybe I could tie a ribbon around it before I gave it to Lady Roxy? Then I noticed that she was already standing there with her hands out, waiting. It seemed she wanted the stone immediately. I placed it in her open palm.

"Here," I said. "I know it's small, but it's a token of my gratitude. Thank you."

"No, no," Lady Roxy said. "Thank *you*!"

She seemed so happy with her ore. Then, suddenly, she seemed so ready to break it open.

"Let's have a look inside!"

"You're going to do it here?!"

"Yes! I can't wait until I get back home!"

Lady Roxy deftly crushed the rock in her bare hands. A holy knight's stats were no joke. The girl at the counter gaped. Of course she did! Here was a seemingly ordinary girl, doing with her bare hands what anybody else would have to do with tools. The only people who could do something like that were holy knights. I watched in fear, scared that Roxy would blow our cover any second.

"Fay! It's a gem! There's a blue gem inside!"

There it was. A clear blue gemstone, just as my Identify skill predicted!

We high-fived in celebration, and I heard the joy in Lady Roxy's heart flicker into me through Telepathy. *"I'll treasure this."*

She wrapped the gem in a handkerchief and placed it in her pouch. I was pleased to see her happy, and I owed it all to Identify.

Lady Roxy was in high spirits, and it seemed she had an idea. "This is a really wonderful present," she said, "so now it's my turn to do something for you! I wonder what we should do...?"

She gazed at me, deep in thought. As I waited, my stomach rumbled. Lady Roxy's eyes lit up at the sound, and she smiled brightly. I had a feeling I knew what idea had just occurred to her.

"You're always so hungry, Fay! Let's go get something delicious to eat!"

It was a very attractive proposition, and one I couldn't refuse. What an angel my lady was, asking me what I wanted to eat!

*Hm, what do I want...? Meat, perhaps? No, no. I can't just be selfish about this.*

Then I remembered that, over tea one day, Lady Roxy had said she adored fish. In that case, I knew just the location. Well, the truth was, when it came to decent fish, I only knew one place: my old bar.

"I know a place," I said. "Their fish is excellent."

"That sounds perfect!"

"I should warn you: it's a place for people of my background, so it's loud, rowdy, and not very refined or cultured."

"Why, that sounds even more perfect!" Lady Roxy clasped her hands to her chest in excitement.

Not the reaction I expected, to say the least. I wasn't sure how to respond. "Huh?"

"You forgot our mission, haven't you, Fay? We're also here to observe the lives of the townspeople."

"Oh, right. We are, aren't we? Wait...what do you mean, 'also'?"

"Ah..."

I'd been so distracted by Lady Roxy's delight that I'd completely overlooked our mission. I didn't know what she meant by that "also here" business, either—observation was the mission's main objective! I tilted my head as Lady Roxy cleared her throat.

"Never mind that," she said. "Let's head to this fish place of yours already. Come on! Now!"

"Okay, okay, I'm going! Don't push!"

"Excellent. Let's go." With that, Lady Roxy marched ahead without me.

"Lexie," I called out, "you're going the wrong way. It's over here!"

"Oh?" she said, hurrying back. "Well, you should have said that earlier!"

Why was she in such a rush? There was no need to hurry. The bar was sure to be quiet over lunch. Perhaps she was just hungry and wanted to get

to the fish as soon as possible. Or maybe she was curious about the kind of bars townsfolk visited. In any case, she'd know soon enough.

"This way, Lexie."

"Okay!"

Lady Roxy trailed after me with a grin. It seemed she was genuinely looking forward to this. In my opinion, it was indeed something to look forward to; the cozy old bar, the friendly barkeep, the delectable fresh fish... Just thinking about it made my stomach rumble so loudly that Lady Roxy heard it from behind me.

"Oh, Fay," she giggled, "you really can't wait, can you? Shall we run?"

"No, no. I can't have you do anything like that. I'll be fine. I can endure!"

But no sooner had I spoken the words than my stomach groaned again.

*Dammit, Gluttony, help me out a little here! Please don't embarrass me in front of Lady Roxy!*

The rumbles persisted. Lady Roxy grabbed my hand with an eager smile. "Come on, let's run! It's this way, right?"

"Yes, but you don't have to pull!"

"You'll be fine! Come on!"

She was so forceful I wasn't sure who was escorting whom anymore. But my stomach didn't care about my concerns. It groaned again, as though urging me forward. Lady Roxy held her sides from laughing so much.

*Well, at least she's having a good time...*

From the thoughts I could read from holding her hand, she seemed as happy on the inside as on the outside. I guess now I knew that if I wanted to make her laugh, I could just let my stomach do the work; she giggled all the way to the bar.

"Oh, that was hilarious," Lady Roxy said.

"It was just a rumbling stomach..."

"My apologies, Fay. I've just never met someone with such a hearty appetite. I think it might always make me laugh! Come now, don't be so sulky. Let's eat!"

I pulled myself together, and we walked inside. It was still early afternoon, so the bar wasn't very crowded. The customers were mostly a few groups of travelers, merchants, and adventurers who'd just finished their meals and were chatting among themselves.

*Now, where to sit?* There was my usual spot at the counter, but now that I was with Lady Roxy, a table seemed like a better idea. I scanned the room and found one table was still free.

"Lexie, shall we sit over there?" I asked.

"Hm... Well, where do you usually sit?"

"At that corner spot at the counter."

"Well then, let's sit there. From the counter, we can also watch the bar staff at work."

Lady Roxy didn't just want to observe the other patrons, but the staff as well. That made the counter seat perfect. I took her where she wanted to go, at which point she promptly sat on my stool. She had stolen the spot I had defended for five years!

"What's wrong, Fay? There's a spot next to me."

"Uh...sure."

I grudgingly took the stool next to a very satisfied Lady Roxy. I couldn't seem to get comfortable in this seat I wasn't used to.

"Hm. Hm!" Lady Roxy nodded. "I see, I see. So this is where you sit when you come here to eat. This was worth checking out!"

*Why was it worth checking out?!*

If I came back tomorrow, I wouldn't find Lady Roxy sitting there, not in a million years. This was a one-off experience, and it suddenly made me nervous. I didn't know whether I'd be able to relax while we ate.

"Well, you don't really need to see the stuff I do..." I said.

"Nonsense. You're a servant of the Hart family now. As your master, it's worth knowing these things about you. Probably..."

Lady Roxy picked up a wooden cup on the counter and examined it. She'd said that last "probably" almost under her breath, but I still heard it. I had no idea how to reply to it, and was grateful when the barkeep appeared.

"Welcome! Well, well, what's this? Fate, you're not alone today! And would this young lady happen to be your...lover?"

I couldn't believe the words coming out of the barkeep's mouth. Even though she was in disguise, Lady Roxy was still a holy knight. On top of that, she was a member of one of the five esteemed families of Seifort!

The noble Lady Roxy and her peasant servant, lovers?! It was beyond unbelievable. If she decided to have me killed out of disrespect because this comment hurt her feelings, I would have no right to defend myself. That was how dangerous the barkeep's words were.

I watched nervously as Lady Roxy crushed the wooden cup she was holding with a single hand. I stared at the crushed cup, jaw agape. Was she...angry?





"Oh, I'm so sorry," said Lady Roxy. "My hand slipped—I didn't mean to destroy your cup!"

"It's fine," said the barkeep. "Sometimes adventurers lose control of their stats and break a couple. It happens. Nothing to worry about. I must say, though, you're much stronger than you look, little lady. And just so we're clear, the cup will be added to your bill."

Far from being angry, it looked like Lady Roxy was excited. It seemed as though the barkeep wasn't going to push her about the cup, either. This was a bar, after all; drunken adventurers broke things all the time. One wooden cup wasn't something to cry about.

In any case, I hastily ordered our food and drink to make sure the barkeep wouldn't go saying any other troubling things.

"Barkeep, your freshest fish, please! And some bread to go with it!"

"What's wrong? No wine today? I daresay a little wine would work wonders on those nerves of yours, don't you think?"

"I'm fine! I don't need it, really!"

After he made fun of me, the barkeep disappeared into the back. I already knew he would be asking me all about this the next time I came by. But I wasn't going to tell him a thing!

Next to me, Lady Roxy sat there smiling, and suddenly she crushed *my* wooden cup too. I heard her whisper to herself repetitively. "Oh my, how troublesome. I guess...I guess people must think we're a couple. Oh my, how troublesome... Yes, how...how very troublesome..."

The counter was quickly becoming a heap of scrap wood. I couldn't understand it. Lady Roxy was always in complete control of her stats. Why was she slipping today?

In any case, we needed more cups.

"Barkeep! One cup, please! Uh, actually, make that three, just in case!"

As I expected, as soon as our food came out, Lady Roxy immediately crushed another wooden cup. I couldn't tell whether we'd come to eat food or destroy cups. The barkeep gave a wry chuckle and brought out another.

The fish was savory and flavored just right, and we devoured it hungrily. I was relieved to see Lady Roxy with an appetite again. According to the maids at the manor, she was so busy with work lately that she wasn't eating much. They were worried about her, but seeing her now, I felt things would be all right.

"Are you okay?" Lady Roxy asked. "You've been staring at me this whole time."

"I'm just relieved," I said. "Recently, you've seemed so tired."

"Oh...you all knew, didn't you? I tried to act the same as usual, but..."

"Lexie, everyone loves you. They're always worried about you."

As she heard that, Lady Roxy began folding her fork into knots. I couldn't believe my eyes. Ordinary people couldn't handle metal as if it were clay!

"Does that mean...you too, Fay? Do you...do you...?"

Just as she was about to finish her sentence, the barkeep returned with another wooden cup.

"Here you go," he said. Then, with a pleading look in his eyes, he added, "I beg of you, however, please don't break any more."

"Ah. Y-yes, of course. Thank you very much."

After the barkeep's interruption, that particular conversation flowed out of sight, and Lady Roxy didn't mention it again. I was curious about what she'd wanted to say, but seeing her there, blushing and inhaling her food, it just didn't seem to matter anymore.

Our lunchtime seemed to slip away as swiftly as we could enjoy it. At times, the barkeep came over to us with pointless banter. Rumors were his specialty, after all. They were the kind of thing I heard all the time; this merchant had a new baby, that merchant from the east had been attacked by goblins and almost died.

But Lady Roxy, now disguised as a regular townspeople, couldn't get enough. It seemed this was exactly what she'd wanted to know. As a holy knight, she couldn't easily learn any of these things—how the kingdom's people lived and what they thought about.

To the townspeople, holy knights lived on an entirely different plane of existence. We hesitated to say much of anything to them. Even for me, as Lady Roxy's servant, the idea of bothering her with trivial, everyday conversation seemed out of the question. Lady Roxy herself might not mind such indiscretions, but the head servant, who managed the rest of us, would never let such behavior slide. To do so would be to invite a severe lecture at *least*.

"Is something on your mind, Fay? Shall we head out soon?"

"I think that's a good idea. We'll want to be home before evening."

The more I pondered it, the more I realized Lady Roxy could only really chat like this with me. In some ways, this whole adventure was similar to the teatime we occasionally shared at the manor. I thought I understood the issue. Rank aside, Lady Roxy didn't really have anyone her own age to talk to. There was only me, a servant one year younger than his master. I couldn't really say how I'd ended up in this role, but if Lady Roxy was happy, I couldn't ask for anything more. I mean, it was fun for me to spend time with her, too.

We paid the bill, and the barkeep called to us as we headed out.

"Hope to see the two of you here again soon!"

Of course he did! He couldn't wait to snoop, pry, and nose into the business of his favorite customer. Next time, we needed to go someplace else—but just as I thought that, Lady Roxy waved right back.

"I hope so! I'll be expecting more stories from you, too!"

The barkeep bellowed with laughter. "Aha, a young lady who knows the game! I'll be sure to gather more juicy rumors!"



Lady Roxy had said exactly what the barkeep wanted to hear, and now he was all delight. I'd have to come back tomorrow and warn him not to start cooking up tall tales. For now, we parted ways with him and headed off. Regardless of any troubles we'd had, I felt full and satisfied. We'd been at the bar for more than four hours. Perhaps a little too long.

"What would you like to do now, Lexie?"

"Hm. Well, we do have to make sure we get back before dark. As you know, *she* has no idea I left the manor today."

She meant the head servant. Since that young woman was also Lady Roxy's secretary, she'd surely go looking if Lady Roxy happened to disappear. I thought she might be searching for Lady Roxy right now, even. I could just picture her, the frustration seething on her face as she fixed her glasses.

"Ah...you know," I said, "I actually *don't* know what you're talking about—you snuck out? Why, I never."

"You can't just pretend you're ignorant and leave me! No fair. If she gets angry, we have to bear the brunt of the lecture together!"

"Whaaaaat? But she destroyed me just yesterday for a slipup on the lawn. I can't handle that kind of heat two days in a row!"

"Sure you can!"

"Really, I can't."

"Just a little would be fine, wouldn't it?"

"You think she does 'a little' of anything?"

"Oh, I give up!"

Lady Roxy's play-anger melted into a bright smile, and we continued our banter all the way back to the Holy Knight District.

## Chapter 14:

### The Corpse That Lurks on Moonlit Nights

**A**S LADY ROXY AND I returned to the manor, I noticed a boy crying in a shaded corner just off the main street. His parents didn't seem to be anywhere nearby; what had happened to them? With the kidnapping incident the other day still fresh in my mind, I was compelled to see whether the boy was okay.

"Lexie, can you give me a few minutes?"

"What's wrong?" asked Lady Roxy.

"Look over there. I'm worried that boy might be lost."

"Of course! Let's go."

*Lady Roxy's sense of justice strikes again.* If a person was in trouble, she could never leave them to it. As she approached the boy, she walked with the air of a holy knight. Even in her disguise, it was overwhelming; she unconsciously parted the crowd before her. I followed close behind.

"Are you lost, little one?" asked Lady Roxy. "Where are your mother and father?"

The boy remained silent.

"There's nothing to fear. It's okay. I'm here to help!"

The boy burst into tears, and the more Lady Roxy talked, the more he cried. It was her aura, really: the aura of a holy knight. It was too much for the boy, who couldn't handle the pressure of being confronted by someone so strong, even if that person was a beautiful young girl like Lady Roxy. What the boy needed now wasn't the dignified and honorable air of a divine protector but the entirely ordinary air of a commoner like me.

"Hey," I said, "did you lose your parents somewhere?"

The boy stared at me suspiciously, then nodded. "I came here shopping with my mother...and I got lost."

"Well, how about I help you look for her?"

"You'd do that for me?"

"Absolutely. Why, just the other day, I helped a lost girl get home. We'll find your mother in no time!"

"Wow, thanks!"

The boy at last dried his nose on his shirt. We had his trust now. I was about to ask him where he'd last seen his mother when Lady Roxy grabbed my sleeve. She wore a dissatisfied expression—like I'd just cheated her of something.

"I wish kids liked *me* that easily."

"Well, I mean...I'm pretty much just a big kid, so the icebreaking is easy..."

"Is that really it?"

"Probably, yeah."

But if I were forced to call it like I really saw it, I'd say that Lady Roxy maybe needed to loosen up a little. If she didn't, people would always be on guard with her. Kids were especially sensitive to that kind of thing. I knew part of the difficulty came from Lady Roxy's rank and upbringing, but it wasn't my place to comment on that.

"In any case," I said, "let's look for the kid's mother. It's only going to get harder when the sun goes down."

"Yes, you're right. Of course. But later I will have you teach me your technique for winning children's hearts."

"Sure. Just don't go too hard on me, please."

I felt like the answer Lady Roxy wanted was already in front of her. If she wanted to make friends with our new companion, it would just take time. Her sincerity would show in her words and actions. They might even bond before we found the boy's mother.

Lady Roxy reached for the boy's hand, but he slipped from her grasp. In the next instant, he appeared next to me and took my hand instead.

"Fay...that's not fair..." Lady Roxy muttered.

"Don't blame me," I said.

Thus, I found myself placating a sulky Lady Roxy while I asked the boy where he'd lost his mother. The problem was that it was hard to lock down a location.

"It was somewhere over there, where all the people are," he said, but "over there" didn't yield much, in the end. I got the feeling it was going to be tough getting a clear answer out of such a little kid.

I was at a loss, but Lady Roxy smiled like she knew something I didn't. "He's still young," she said, "which means he can't have gone too far. And judging by what he said, I don't think he's been lost all that long."

"That makes sense," I replied.

"I think he wandered off somewhere in the crowd along this main street. I'm certain his mother is looking for him, too, so if we take him up and down the road, there's a good chance we'll bump into her."

"Lexie, you're a genius!"

Lady Roxy giggled. Feeling useful seemed to make her happy, and her expression relaxed. At the same time, the boy thoughtfully watched our exchange. He seemed hopeful he really would find his mother, and he slipped his free hand into Lady Roxy's. With me on his left and Lady Roxy on his right, we almost looked like a family. Well, probably more like three siblings.

"Fay, what are you waiting for? Let's go!"

"Uh, yes. Sorry. Okay, let's go find your mother!"

"Yay!" the boy cried.

It was the cusp of evening, and the streets were quieter than at midday, but they were still bustling. I gripped the boy's hand firmly; I didn't want him to get lost a second time. The boy told us his mother's name, and

we called it out as we walked. We spent a whole two hours like that, but we didn't find her.

"Mama! Mamaaa!"

The boy had been so energetic before, but he began to flag. After all, he'd been looking for his mother even before we found him. He had a lot of stamina in that little body of his.

But what to do now? Perhaps his mother wasn't on this street anymore. If she thought he'd strayed, she might be searching for him off the main road. If that were the case, we'd never find her by sticking in the same place.

"What should we do?" I asked Lady Roxy.

"There's still time before sundown. Let's continue the search for a little longer, Fay."

Her words made me rethink my approach. The boy was the most anxious and uneasy of all of us. If we didn't plan on helping him to the end, why had we even talked to him in the first place?

I ruffled his hair. "Let's try walking down the street once more. I'm sure we'll find your mother this time."

"Okay..."

Lady Roxy frowned at me, and I wished she hadn't. I could read the look in her eyes: *Why are you saying you're sure?! What do we do if we don't find her?!*

But there was no other way to keep our little friend motivated. I had to say *something*. And I could tell it worked, because the boy's thoughts flowed through his hand into my brain thanks to my Telepathy. A spark of his hope had rekindled.

We pulled him along until we heard the sound of a rumbling stomach. Lady Roxy glared disapprovingly in my direction. *How could you be hungry at a time like this?!*

But it wasn't me, and that meant only one other person could be the cause of the rumbling.

"I'm starving," the boy said, releasing my hand to clutch his stomach.

Lady Roxy and I shared a glance; it was time to put the search on hold. We had to think of it like a battle. Food was energy, and we would rapidly become ineffective on empty stomachs. Gluttony had taught me that only too well.

"If you're hungry," Lady Roxy said, "let's get some food, and then we'll look for your mother. Would you like something to eat?"

"Um...is that...okay? Really?"

The boy looked overjoyed. He was probably even hungrier than we knew. Lady Roxy smiled and offered some options, but couldn't commit to anything by herself. She tried asking the boy for his opinion, but he kept saying he'd eat anything. He was clearly being polite. Soon, Lady Roxy was at the end of her rope, and she turned to me for help. Once again, it was up to me to cross the profound gap between holy knights and commoners.

I considered the boy's clothes. They were shabby, all patchwork, and too big for him. He was definitely from a poor family—not so different from myself only a few weeks ago. I knew exactly what he wanted.

"Let's go get you some tasty meat, shall we?" I said.

"Yay!"

The boy grabbed both my hands out of sheer delight, and the two of us sang a song of the feast that lay ahead. Roxy watched with a chuckle until my stomach rumbled its approval, at which point she and the boy both burst out laughing.

"Looks like we've got more than one empty stomach on our hands," Lady Roxy said.

"We're the same, mister!" laughed the boy.

"Yeah," I said. "I guess we are."

I felt the boy's thoughts through Telepathy, and he was the happiest he'd been so far. He would be even happier after food. The question now was where to find it.

Lady Roxy and I scanned the area. We ruled out eating indoors on the off chance the boy's mother passed by while we were feeding him. That meant a barbecue skewer stall would be ideal. Luckily, we'd passed one earlier in our search.

"How about that one over there?" I suggested.

"Okay!" The boy pulled me along excitedly.

I let myself be dragged as Lady Roxy whispered in my ear. "You really saved me there with your culinary input. Thank you!"

"Don't thank me. Getting food was your idea."

"But you're the one who gave the idea real shape!"

I felt my face go red at Lady Roxy's gentle words of praise. I'd never been complimented growing up, so it inevitably made me feel awkward and embarrassed. Lady Roxy left me with the boy and went on ahead to make sure it was open. She didn't need to, in my opinion; as far as I remembered, the stall did business all-year round. There was no way it would be closed today.

As expected, the stall was overflowing with the delicious smell of grilled meat when the boy and I caught up. It wasn't quite dinner time, so the line wasn't very long. Lady Roxy was already waiting and she waved.

"Fay! Over here."

It was the first time I'd ever seen her wave so enthusiastically. She was always so modest, and her hands rarely moved far from her chest. I wondered whether her townspeople disguise also offered her a physical release of sorts.

I waved back in response. "We'll be right there!"

"Miss!" the boy shouted.

We joined Lady Roxy in line. There were only three people in front of us, so we'd get our skewers quickly. Meat fragrance wafted deliciously in the air, and my stomach rumbled once more.

"Mister, your stomach's grumbling again!"

"Unbelievable," said Lady Roxy. "Fay here is quite the glutton. Ha ha!"

The boy and Lady Roxy laughed together. I didn't think it was *that* funny. As we waited, my stomach continued to rumble.

Eventually, we made it to the front of the line.

"Welcome. What can I get for you?"

We ordered one skewer each. The trouble was deciding on flavors. There was the standard gravy-sauce skewer, the simple spicy-salt skewer, and the herb-roasted skewer. It was an agony to choose between. Then Lady Roxy made a genius suggestion.

"Why don't we each get a different one and share?"

"That's a great idea."

"Yay! I agree!"

"One of each, please," I said to the man at the stall.

"Coming right up! Here you go!"

I took the three skewers, and then it hit me. I didn't have the money to pay. But Lady Roxy swooped in to handle the transaction as if she knew exactly what I was thinking.

"Thanks, Lexie."

She glanced around and leaned in to whisper. "It's fine. I *am* your master, after all. I ought to provide for you, yes?"

We moved to the side of the stall to eat. I had the standard-sauce skewer, the boy had the spicy-salt one, and Lady Roxy had the herb-roasted one. They all looked mouthwateringly delectable.

"Let's eat!"

The skewer was melt-in-your-mouth soft, and the sauce perfectly enhanced the meat's natural flavor. It was no wonder the stall was so popular. The boy blissfully chewed away at his own skewer. The tears welling in his eyes told me everything I needed to know about its taste. However, Lady Roxy still hadn't tried hers.

"What's wrong, Lexie?"

"It's just...I've never eaten anything that wasn't on a plate before... I don't...I don't really know how."

Lady Roxy wasn't used to ripping straight into her food teeth-first. She might've found it embarrassing. The skewer was a far cry from the refined cuisine holy knights were accustomed to. After all, it was common grub for common folk. The food stalls here generally aimed to hit three points: quick, cheap, and delicious. A sophisticated, elegant meal this was not.

"Well," I said, "you just...you open your mouth wide and bite off a chunk. That's all there is to it."

"I guess... Well, I guess I'll try my best, then..."

Lady Roxy shyly turned away from the two of us and started nibbling. It took her a moment, but after working out a plan of attack, she got her first bite.

The boy and I watched intently.

"Hm? This is...this is most delicious," she said, turning back to us as she took more bites from her skewer. "The meat is so tender, and the roasted herbs drift over the tongue. I might go so far as to say this is superb. Let me have one more mouthful..."

"Uh, Lexie...? Did you forget we're all sharing?"

"Oh! Excuse me," she said, poking out her tongue apologetically. "I guess I was the glutton this time."

She pointed her skewer at me expectantly. "Here, have some."

"Um...I can eat it myself, Lexie. You don't have to hold it for me."

"You don't want me to hold it?"

"Ah, it's not that, it's just..."

"Well, go on, then. Have some!"

Lady Roxy held the skewer ever closer. Now I had no choice. I took a bite—and it was amazing. Exactly as she had described. The roasted herbs spread in a refreshing flash of flavor through my mouth, which was followed by the rich aftertaste of succulent meat.

"This *is* amazing," I said.

"It is, isn't it?" Lady Roxy giggled.

I tilted my head in confusion at her laughter. Perhaps there was meat on my face? I wiped at my mouth as Lady Roxy chuckled.

"No, no, it's not that, Fay. It's just that you look so pleased when you eat. Seeing it up close... Hee hee!"

"Do I really look *that* happy?"

"You do. But I'd like to make sure one more time!" Lady Roxy playfully thrust the skewer toward my mouth again.

"Wait, I'm not ready!"

"No waiting! Eat!"

Suddenly, I felt an uncomfortable gaze from nearby. The young boy was staring at us in utter upset. Brought back to reality, I cleared my throat.

"You can't just feed me, Lexie," I said. "Share some of your skewer with our friend."

"Uh...yes. Of course, yes."

It was like we'd forgotten the whole reason we bought the skewers in the first place: because our young friend was hungry. We spent the rest of our time swapping skewers between all three of us as we ate. Afterwards, with a slightly fuller stomach, the boy looked like he had some of his energy back.

"Mister, miss... Let's go find my mother."

"That's the spirit!"

"Yes," Lady Roxy added, "Let's do our best!"

We went back to scouring the main street, searching for the boy's mother. For another two hours, we searched everywhere we could, but we never found her.

We were doing the best we could, but at this rate...I didn't know what to expect anymore.

\*\*\*

"Mama..."

The boy's hope hung by a thread as he called his mother in a voice little more than a whisper. Lady Roxy and I tried to encourage him, but he was less and less responsive.

The sun was setting, and if we didn't find his mother by nightfall, we'd have to call off our search. I shot Lady Roxy a glance while the boy wasn't looking, and she nodded silently, reading my eyes. Our best course of action now would be to take the boy back to Hart Manor for the evening. Lady Roxy's look of resolve relieved me. I could see she'd considered this option from the start.

The boy pulled at my hand weakly. "I'm tired, mister," he said. "I can't walk anymore."

He'd reached the limits of his energy. I scooped him up to carry on my back.

"I'm sorry," he mumbled.

"Don't you worry about it," I said. "There's a fountain up ahead. Let's head over there and take a break."

"Okay."

The fountain was in the middle of the town square at the end of the main street. It constantly sprayed water pumped from streams deep belowground. Sometimes I drank from it when I was thirsty, since the water was so pure and clean.

The three of us sat on the fountain's edge and listened to the bubbling while Lady Roxy and I tried to determine how we should explain our concerns to the boy. He seemed to read from the awkward silence that something was going on.

"It's getting dark out, so why don't we look for your mother again tomorrow?" I asked. "I know I said that I was sure we'd find her, but we didn't. I'm sorry."

"No, I'm glad you guys were here. If I was all alone...I wouldn't know what to do."

The rest was up to Lady Roxy. Hart Manor was her home, and if we were taking the boy there for the evening, it wasn't my place to tell him.

"You can stay with me tonight," she said to the boy. "We'll make sure you feel right at home."

The boy thought about it for a time. He was nervous, and it was understandable. He'd only met us earlier that afternoon. We were still strangers to him. But we couldn't leave him alone on the streets, not if those kidnappers were lurking around.



Eventually, the boy gave a tired answer. "Okay."

Even so, he remained seated at the fountain. While he was unable to move, we waited with him without saying a word. Though our intentions were good, we weren't going to force him to come with us until he was ready.

The boy turned his face toward the sky, like it might be his last time to see it, and he cried out for his mother. It was a helpless plea at the end of a long, long search, a message that could never hope to reach its destination.

And yet...

"Son?! Son!"

A woman's voice cried out from behind us, repeating over and over.

"Mama!"

The boy's eyes opened wide and he took off, running straight into the arms of the woman who was no doubt his mother.

Seeing them reunited, I couldn't help but be warmed—even on the brink of despair, there had always been a chance of success. There was always reason to hope!

Lady Roxy and I smiled in a quiet moment of celebration.

"All's well that ends well, huh?" I said.

"Yes. I was really worried for a bit, but it seems to have all worked out."

At that moment, Lady Roxy's left hand brushed my own, and inarticulable feelings flowed into my thoughts. They were too warm, too kind for a person like myself. I didn't deserve them.

After a time, the mother and son relaxed their hold on each other, relieved, and the boy started telling his mother something as he pointed in our direction. Wasn't hard to guess what he was talking about. When he finished, his mother came over to us.

"It seems you two looked after my little one when he got lost. I can't thank you enough."

"Mister, miss, thank you!" the boy chimed in.

"Just don't get lost again, okay?" I said.

"And don't stray too far from your mother, please," Lady Roxy added.

"Okay."

According to the boy's mother, she had been delivering some goods to a merchant when her son vanished. He left her sight for a mere instant, and then he was gone. Panicked, she ran everywhere searching for him, first on the main street, then through its connected backstreets. She'd been scouring entirely different alleys than we had, which explained why we had never crossed paths.

Exhausted from her fruitless quest, the boy's mother dragged herself to the fountain in the town square to quench her thirst...just as we arrived to take our break. Coincidence had brought mother and son back together,

though I also wanted to believe the pull of their emotions had drawn them to the same place.

As his mother showered us in thanks, the boy started to give in to exhaustion, falling asleep in her arms. We saw the two off on their path home, and at last, a load lifted from our shoulders. Trying to help a lost kid only to fail to find their parents would have felt pretty awful. Having to stretch the search to the next day wouldn't have felt a lot better.

Had I been acting out of character recently? Perhaps, being stronger than before, I was getting carried away. Or perhaps strength afforded me the luxury of generosity.

In any case, I was grateful Lady Roxy had been with me. I might have been fine approaching the boy on my own, but I would have been clueless about what to do if we couldn't find his mother. It was reassuring to know Lady Roxy would have looked after him at Hart Manor.

Lady Roxy gazed for a long time at the path the boy and his mother walked, even after they faded into the distance. She was statuesque, and her eyes were glassy. A single tear dropped from her cheek, reflecting rays of light from the setting sun. Noticing my gaze, she turned and smiled.

"All's well that ends well," she echoed.

But I couldn't say anything. Her figure in that moment captured my heart. I was embarrassed. Entranced. I had forgotten how to breathe, and I was certain my face was glowing red. I prayed that the setting sun's colors hid it. It wouldn't do for a servant like me to get caught looking at his master like this.

"What's wrong, Fay?"

"I-It's nothing. But if we don't get home soon, the head servant is going to be furious."

"And we'll face her together, won't we?"

"Ah..."

I wanted to say no, but one look at Lady Roxy's face, and it didn't seem to matter anymore. After all, I'd roped her into helping that lost boy. If her secretary chewed her out for being late on top of sneaking away, half the responsibility was squarely mine.

"Yes," I said. "We'll face her together."

"Very good. Well, let's head home."

Lady Roxy led the way with a confident, dignified gait. She could wear whatever she wanted, but she was still a holy knight through and through.

So we returned together: me and Lady Roxy, my master who deserved love and respect. She was a clever, determined, compassionate person, and from the bottom of my heart, I was glad to serve her. We'd been through a lot that day, and for me, it had been unforgettable.

"Fay," she said, "what is it? You look so happy all of a sudden."

"It's a secret."

"But surely you can tell me, at least."

"That's the one thing I can't do."

“Fay!”

Lady Roxy’s cheeks puffed up as she tried to get me to talk, but I pushed on toward home with a silent smile. All the way, I wished these days would last forever.

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My night hunts continued. Each time, I showed myself to a few adventurers. As a result, word began to spread from eyewitness accounts that somewhere in the fields was a lich, a monster of great evil. It was said that liches wore black hooded robes made of ragged cloth, and their bodies were fleshless bones. It was a perfect match for my disguise.

On this particular night, the sky was empty of clouds. Perfect weather for an evening hunt. Experienced parties of ambitious adventurers were out in the Goblin Grasslands and the Hobgoblin Forest. Among them was me, the evil lich, gliding through the Goblin Grasslands by the light of the moon.

When I found a goblin, I beheaded it, and if an adventurer happened by, I allowed them a momentary glimpse of my silhouette. By doing so, I gradually made my existence a lurking nightmare for adventurers. And I was getting worse.

After I killed my tenth goblin, I took a break and heard a scream from the bushes.

“It’s the lich! The Corpse! Everyone get out of here!”

The cry came from a rugged, tough-looking adventurer, who turned pale white and fled upon seeing my skull mask.

People had recently taken to calling me the Corpse, likely on account of how I was most often spotted alone on a mountain of goblin corpses. Adventurers were growing fearful that the Corpse, a lich with a taste for goblins, would soon move on to people. This followed the lore; your typical lich was known to have a great fondness for human victims.

At my local bar, an adventurer sitting next to me had said the Corpse was an unusual beast, but it would inevitably turn its attention to humans. He’d told me this with trepidation painted across his features as he drowned his sorrows in drink.

The barkeep had said that because the Corpse only appeared in the middle of night, it wasn’t having an adverse impact on trade. However, he was anxious; rumor was that the situation might change if word of the Corpse spread outside the kingdom. If trade were delayed, it would incite inflation, which would make running the bar difficult.

My heart pitied the barkeep and his predicament, but I needed to wait on movement from the holy knights.

Just as the pieces started to fall into place, I was faced with work I couldn’t avoid. Lady Roxy was heading back to the Hart family estate, and as she had promised, she wanted to take me with her. Just a little more work, a little more time, and I would have had Hado Vlerick within my grasp.

It was a great pity.

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"You look rather despondent, Fay. Are you not looking forward to visiting the estate?"

Lady Roxy pouted slightly at me. I should have been excited to be alone in a horse and carriage with her, and yet my mind was elsewhere. I was dwelling on how my plans to trap Hado Vlerick were now on hold, but I had to shake off the frustration. Lady Roxy was looking forward to heading home, and I didn't want to spoil her mood.

"No, it's not that," I said. "I've definitely been looking forward to this!"

"Really?" She peered at me with suspicion in her eyes. *But you haven't looked the least bit excited so far*, they said.

"Really! I mean, it's harvest season, right? And that means we'll get to pick grapes together, right? I can't wait!"

"Oh, you remembered."

"Of course!"

Every year, when Lady Roxy returned home to the estate, she joined the villagers of the estate for the harvest. This was one of only a few events during which Lady Roxy could interact honestly with common folk. I could tell how important this was to her from the moment she boarded the horse and carriage; she was a bundle of joy and excitement.

The Hart family estate was located before a ravine in the mountains north of Seifort. It was autumn now, but the geography brought harsh seasonal changes to the Hart territory, and in winter, snow blanketed the land. However, the locals had worked over many generations to develop the soil. As a result, the estate now boasted rich, fertile farmland. Not only were they able to stockpile enough produce to endure the winter, they shipped large quantities to the kingdom, too. The Hart family took great pride in this ability to provide for Seifort.

"From what you've told me so far," I said, "I can tell it's an amazing place. I bet the food's delicious, too!"

Lady Roxy giggled. "Always so quick when it comes to food, aren't you? Yes, it's nice to have such fertile lands, but this season also brings monsters, I'm afraid. Around this time of year, they enter our estate to steal from the fields. One of the reasons I come back is to fend them off."

"Monsters..." I said, furrowing my brow. "They really are everywhere, aren't they?"

Lady Roxy covered her giggle with a hand. "Yes, they're forever troublesome. But if we drive them out now, they won't return until next year. And I *am* a holy knight, you know. They won't cause me much trouble."

"As expected of a holy knight, I suppose," I said. "By the way, what monsters are we talking here?"

"Kobolds."

Kobolds... Dog-like monsters that walked on two legs, built much larger than the average human. They were a level up from goblins, and I'd heard that, even among adventurers, only experienced individuals could hunt them. Kobolds ran in packs, and when under attack, they howled for reinforcements. They also had a keen sense of smell, which meant hiding in the grass would get you nowhere; they'd sniff you out. They were also persistent and stubborn, which made them formidable foes indeed.

Just thinking about them made my stomach rumble.

"Fay, what's wrong?" asked Lady Roxy. "You're hungry again? Why, we just ate."

Recently, this had happened a lot in front of Lady Roxy. It was mortifying, but also a sign that my Gluttony hungered. It was tired of goblins, and so it urged me, in its own way, to feed on the taste of a new kind of soul.

I gave a wry grin in reply. "Sorry, Lady Roxy. We ate so much, and yet...I'm hungry all over again."

"You really do have quite the appetite, don't you, Fay? But it's a good thing, I think. Not long until we reach the estate now, so I hope you can survive until then."

Lady Roxy turned to the window and stared outside. Fields stretched clear to the foot of the mountain; they were lined with vines dripping with fresh violet grapes. The carriage carried us ever further, toward a mansion easily as colossal as Hart Manor.

## Chapter 15: The Marked Girl

**W**HEN THE CARRIAGE arrived at the mansion, a woman appeared, supported on either side by the two maids who accompanied her. She seemed frail and weak, perhaps ill. At the same time, she was strikingly lovely, and she looked just like Lady Roxy.

*Wait, is this...?*

"Mother!" Lady Roxy said. "Didn't I tell you that you didn't need to greet us on arrival?"

So I was right. She was indeed Lady Roxy's mother.

Over tea, Lady Roxy had told me of her mother, and how she suffered from a terrible illness. I never would have imagined that same person meeting us at the front door of the mansion. Even now she looked unwell and fragile, as though she might cough blood and collapse at any moment. If her condition appeared so dire to me, then her daughter's anxiety was more than understandable. This woman was the last parent Lady Roxy had. Of course she was concerned.

I supposed some illnesses were so serious that even one of the five esteemed families, with all their status and wealth, could fail to overcome them.

"Mother, please, I beg of you. Please don't push yourself."

"I'm fine, Roxy. I feel much better than usual today. Hm?!"

Lady Roxy stood before her mother nervously as the woman turned her gaze on me. Her face was...like that of a child who had just received a thrilling new toy.

"And who might this be?"

"This is Fate Graphite. He's the new servant I hired. I brought him here because I wanted to introduce you."

In line with Lady Roxy's introduction, I bowed before her mother.

"You've come a long way. Welcome to our home, I am Aisha Hart."

"Thank you, Lady Hart. It is my honor."

"Ah, but the honor is mine. Please, come inside."

At Lady Aisha's instruction, a few maids waiting in the wings appeared and more or less dragged me into the mansion. *I guess this is what being welcomed feels like.*

Unfortunately, that left Lady Roxy standing outside on her own.

"Mother, wait!" she shouted. "Mother! He's *my* servant!"

The maids brought me to a gorgeous living room and sat me in a chair next to a little table by the window. Only once I was seated did they release their grip.

Sitting across the table was Lady Roxy's mother. I gathered Lady Aisha was a woman used to getting her way. Lady Roxy arrived a moment

later, her cheeks puffed up in anger. She was displeased with her mother for so abruptly taking the initiative.

"Mother!"

"Oh, you've come, too? Please, have a seat, my love."

Lady Roxy hmped in dissatisfaction but sat obediently as directed. I got the feeling it was a Hart family tradition to start off Lady Roxy's visits with a cup of tea. Perhaps Lady Roxy got her love for teatime from her mother. The thought made me smile.

"Mister Fate," Lady Aisha said, "Do you love my daughter?"

The question caught me off guard, and it was all I could do not to spit out the entirety of my tea. I had absolutely no idea how to respond. *This is the very first question she asks me?!*

Lady Roxy was furious, her face scarlet with rage. "What kind of a question is that?!"

"Oh, was I out of line? I only wanted to inquire as to whether he loves you as the master of the manor. If you were forcing him to work, he wouldn't say he was happy, would he?"

I was still blindsided. *Is that what she meant?* It had sounded like such a different question to me. After all, I was a peasant and Lady Roxy was a holy knight. Our positions were just too distant. Even if we both felt such a thing, it would be an impossible dream.

Lady Aisha smiled broadly and asked again, but I already knew what I wanted to say. I'd known for a long time.

"I have nothing but adoration in my heart for Lady Roxy," I said. "If she would let me, I would gladly serve her until the end of my life." The words expressed my honest feelings.

"Oh, my." Lady Aisha put her hands together in an elegant display of delight at my loyalty.

Meanwhile, Lady Roxy choked on her tea, and her face remained a brilliant crimson shade. "If you'll excuse me," she said, "I'm going to rest in my room."

With that, Lady Roxy fled. I was worried. Had I said something out of line? But Lady Aisha smiled at me pleasantly.

"It would seem Roxy is tired from your long journey," she said. "She's certainly kept busy with her duties in the kingdom. But please don't worry. I'm sure after a rest she'll be back to her usual self."

"I hope so..."

Lady Roxy's abrupt exit had left me stranded. Fortunately, Lady Aisha was a talented conversationalist, and she told me all about the various work presently involved in developing new varieties of grape, as well as stories of Lady Roxy as a young girl.

"That really happened?" I asked after one such tale.

"Yes, indeed," said Lady Aisha. "When she was young, Roxy was every bit the crybaby. She sobbed even at the sight of a tiny little insect. It's nigh

unbelievable to think that little girl grew up to be the holy knight she is now."

A flash of sadness crossed Lady Aisha's face. She'd recently lost her beloved husband, and the burden of his responsibilities had fallen on the shoulders of their daughter's shoulders. Lady Aisha had to be worried, so I plucked up my courage to speak.

"Lady Roxy is a truly admirable holy knight," I said. "The citizens of Seifort gladly place their trust in her, and I believe she'll carry out her duties as head of the Hart family with greatest honor."

"Is that so...? I'm relieved, then. Thank you, Fate."

There were tears in Lady Aisha's eyes. Losing the head of the family had been a great wound for the Harts, and I had the feeling it still wasn't healed.

Our teatime concluded on this melancholy note as the maids who had lingered in the corner of the room came forward to inform Lady Aisha that it was time for her rest. Her health was at the foremost of their responsibilities. I thanked the lady for the tea, and because I had nothing else to do with my time, I decided to explore the estate. I asked a maid whether I could go for a walk on the grounds, and she requested only that I not get lost.

"Don't worry, I won't go far," I said. Then I passed her the black sword Greed for safekeeping, and I headed out of the mansion.

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The Hart estate's vineyards were vast, and their sweet scent tickled deep in my nose. There was a breathtaking contrast between the blue sky and green-covered lands. I wandered as villagers in the vineyards worked earnestly at the harvest. They looked incredibly busy.

I remembered then that Lady Roxy and I would take part in the grape picking the following day, together with the people of the estate. I'd never picked grapes before, and I didn't know the particulars. If I went into it without any preparation and did a poor job, I would shame my master. This might be a good chance to do a practice run. Swallowing my fear, I approached the grape pickers.

"Hello, there," I said. "My name's Fate Graphite, and I'm a new servant of the Hart family. Would you mind teaching me how to pick grapes?"

There was a long silence.

*Uh oh. Did I just put my foot in my mouth? Is this not allowed?*

"Oh ho! Are you saying you'll give us a hand?" one of them asked.

"We could use the help! You Hart family servants are all so conscientious!"

The men and women stopped working for a moment and gathered around. They kindly showed me the proper way to pick the grapes, and where to take those I harvested. As I should have expected of people living on the Hart estate, everyone was kind and friendly. Soon enough, I realized



I had been working like a packhorse right up until sunset. Still, nobody stopped, so there was no chance for me to slip away unnoticed.

As I took a short break at the edge of the field, villagers came up to me, offering freshly squeezed grape juice.

"You really did us a big favor! Here, drink this, it'll help wash away the weariness of work!"

"Thank you."

They weren't joking. The sweet grape juice expanded in my mouth with just a touch of acidity, easing my exhaustion. I'd never drunk anything like it.

"This is incredible," I said.

The villagers laughed.

"We know! We're very proud of it. In the past, we weren't able to harvest nearly this much."

"Is that so?"

"It is. The old head of the Hart family, gods rest his soul, he put everything into developing the land. He called in experts from other territories, and all the villagers came together to learn from them. It's a bit nostalgic to think back on. Anyway, that's the reason we've got these vineyards now."

The men and women fell into sadness for a moment, drinking their grape juice as though nursing their hearts with wine.

"Anyway, how's Lady Roxy doing? We've been worried ever since the news of her father's passing in Galia. She's a kind one, that girl, and surely her heart must be hurting."

"It was a shock for her, I'm sure," I said, "but Lady Roxy is strong. She performs her duties for the kingdom flawlessly, and I'm sure she'll be fine. She'll rise above this loss."

I tried my best to tell the villagers what I felt in my heart. Everyone looked surprised by my earnestness, but their faces quickly brightened as they poured more juice into my cup.

"Wait," I said. "I-I can't drink this much!"

"You'll be fine! Drink up, boy! Drink!"

I indulged in a little more time with the warmth of their conversation and hospitality before heading back to the Hart family mansion.

The setting sun was at my back, and as I walked back toward the main house, I noticed an unfamiliar young girl walking through the field toward me. She had messy white hair and tan skin. It was clear she wasn't from these parts—that much was evident from the giant axe she carried on her shoulder. Not the sort of thing you expected to see a young girl lugging around! And her body was covered in white markings, perhaps tattoos? They struck me as ritualistic, somehow, or ceremonial.

The girl drew to a stop by my side, her face entirely expressionless.

"Hey. You," she said in a sweet, childlike voice.

When she turned to face me, her eyes were so red I almost couldn't hold her gaze. I'd seen such eyes before, but... How was that possible? I used Identify to check, but...

*What? That's weird... I can't see anything. This has never happened before. Why?*

"Hey. Are you listening?" The girl's voice cut through my thoughts. In contrast to her meek appearance, she held herself like a person of terrible strength. Her cool eyes seemed to glare at me.





"Do you want something from me?" I asked.

"No... It's nothing. It seems I'm still too early."

"What?"

The girl ignored my questions; it was like she was having a one-sided conversation.

"I came here to hunt kobolds, but you can have them. That's one you owe me," she said.

"Wait—what?"

"We'll meet again. Bye."

The conversation was over as quickly as it started, and the girl left.

*Who was that...?*

Her red eyes were identical to my own when my Gluttony was starving. My heart rate picked up, beating ever faster. *Is that girl like me? If she is, shouldn't I chase her down and stop her?*

I stared after the girl as she faded into the setting sun, until I heard a voice call me from behind.

I turned to find Lady Roxy. "I've been searching all over for you, Fay. What happened? You look worried."

"Oh, really? Ha ha...ha."

I smiled and pushed my worries away. Whatever this was, it was my problem, and it had nothing to do with Lady Roxy. She was the one person I didn't want to know about red eyes and soul-eating skills. I would ask Greed later instead.

Lady Roxy's head tilted slightly, and her curious gaze followed my own toward the girl in the distance.

"What's a Galian doing here?" she asked, surprised.

"Galian? You mean, she's..."

Monsters were out of control on the continent of Galia, where they ran rampant. But the story went that, long ago, a country of unparalleled martial prowess had thrived there. That country's people, known as Galian, were a race with hair as white as snow and healthy tanned skin. For reasons not entirely clear, they'd perished following a sharp increase in monsters in the area.

The Galian civilization's few remaining survivors had joined other races, and over the following generations, pureblooded Galian faded out of existence.

"It's the first time I've seen anybody of Galian descent who still retains so many of their unique characteristics. Do you know her, Fay?"

"No, she just stopped to talk to me for a moment."

"I see..."

We stood there for a time, watching the girl until she vanished over the horizon.

"It's a mysterious world out there," Lady Roxy said, smiling. "What have you been doing, Fay?"

“I asked the people of the estate to teach me how to pick grapes... And then they kind of roped me into helping them out all day.”

Lady Roxy giggled. “Is that so? Well, I hope you didn’t overdo it. We’ve still got tomorrow ahead of us, too. Come, let’s return to the mansion, shall we?”

## Chapter 16: To Pluck and to Eat

UPON OUR RETURN to the Hart family's mansion, we found everyone busy with dinner preparations. I asked the maids what I could do to help but was promptly rejected. Instead, the maids pointed to my muddy clothes and told me to take a bath.

I was a mess, which was only natural, considering I'd worked hard harvesting grapes all day. A lovely maid named Maya led me to the servants' bathing quarters. The small bath was just large enough for one person. The warm water flowing from it smelled different from the fresh water I was used to.

"Wait," I said. "Is this...?"

"It's a hot spring," Maya said, giggling. "A few sources are located across the Hart estate. The bathwater's drawn from one such location. It's a perk of being a servant of the family here."

"It's amazing. So this is one of those hot springs everyone talks about."

I'd never seen a hot-spring bath in my life. I scooped up some water in my hand.

"It's transparent, yet there's a kind of weight to it. A thickness."

"That's right," said Maya. "The water's good for your skin, and your dirty body will sparkle once you bathe in it. Put your clothes in the basket there, and I'll leave your change of clothes here."

"Thank you very much."

Once Maya had taught me the workings of the bath, she left, and I quickly stripped off my clothes.

*Hm?*

I realized the door to the bath was slightly ajar, and behind it was Maya, peeking into the bathroom with a smile.

"Can I help you?!" I asked.

"Shall I wash your back for you?"

"I...I'll be fine, thank you! I can do it myself!" I cried, flinching in surprise.

A bored look crossed Maya's otherwise sweet-faced features and she closed the door.

*What a shock... Perhaps she was just being thoughtful?*

In any case, I was glad the servants here could make jokes. This estate had the same warm, considerate atmosphere I felt at Hart Manor in Seifort. I washed the mud and dirt from my body and entered the bathtub.

*Wow... This feels like coming back to life.*

The temperature was just right, and it enveloped my body. I melted away, wishing I could live at the mansion like a family member, all while knowing that was a pipe dream...

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After my bath, I headed to the dining room to help with dinner preparations only to find they were already finished. I stopped one maid and asked what I could do to help, but she told me not to worry. It was like she was treating me as a guest Lady Roxy had brought to the mansion. As a Hart family servant, I couldn't help feeling uneasy.

Finally, a maid approached me with a message.

"Lady Roxy has called for you. Please head to the large room at the end of the hall."

"Understood."

I went where I was told and found a massive door, which I opened. Inside was a dining table spilling over with an incredible variety of beautiful foods. Lady Roxy sat at the end of the table, alone. In the corner stood a line of maids, ready to serve at any moment.

*Ah, I see. So it's like that, huh?*

Without missing a beat, I joined the maids. Even if they treated me as a guest, I was still Lady Roxy's servant, and my role was to serve my master. This was a chance to demonstrate the skills I had acquired at the manor in Seifort! It didn't matter whether my task was pouring wine or serving soup, I'd be on it in a flash. The time had come to show my true skill as a servant of the family!

Then Lady Roxy pointed to the seat to her right. "Fate, you sit here. Not over there, here."

"Eh?!"

*Is that...even okay?*

Nervously, I glanced at the line of maids. In one synchronous movement, they all pointed at the empty seat to Lady Roxy's right. The gesture spoke for them: *Sit, dummy!*

I surrendered and took the empty seat, but I couldn't relax. This was unprecedented; at the manor in the kingdom, I always ate with the other servants. Here I was, for the first time ever, having dinner in a spacious, luxurious hall, surrounded by maids. Sure, I knew table manners, but as a server, not a diner. I couldn't believe this was happening. My head whirled as Lady Roxy, who looked pleased with herself, leaned over and spoke to me.

"You don't have to mind your manners here," she said. "You eat just the way you like."

"Is that all right?!"

"I know your appetite, Fay, and worrying about your table manners is only going to slow you down."

It was true, I was ravenous, so I took a slice of bread and placed it in my mouth. The luxurious fat of butter spread and filled my cheeks. It was exquisite! I began stuffing myself with bread as a maid arrived to top my glass with wine. Perhaps she was worried I'd need something to wash down



all the bread...or perhaps I was eating too quickly? I emptied the wine glass in a single gulp.

"Wow, this is delicious," I said.

"I'm so happy to hear you like it. But you haven't touched a thing aside from the bread, Fay."

"Oh, really?"

Next, I ate a river-fish sauté Lady Roxy recommended. It was savory, rich, and flaked like a dream. In fact, this whole meal was like a dream, and yet one thing bothered me.

"Lady Roxy," I said, "I see Lady Aisha is absent."

Lady Roxy sighed. "It's always like this. Whenever I come home, she gets all excited and rushes out to greet me, but it's so exhausting she spends the rest of the day in bed." Realizing I had stopped eating, she smiled. "It's nothing for you to worry about, Fay. Like I said, it's always like this. She'll be fine come tomorrow."

I got the feeling Lady Roxy wasn't being entirely honest. If I touched her hand, I could read her true thoughts with Telepathy, and I wanted to know. However, as I was about to reach out, I reconsidered. What could I even do for her with that private knowledge? I retracted my fingers.

"Well, let's not let this food go to waste," Lady Roxy said. "I'm counting on you to take care of my mother's share, too. So eat up!"

"Even with my appetite, all this might be a little too much for me."

"I said, eat up!"

Lady Roxy seemed to find the act of feeding me amusing. She put plate after plate in front of me, and my stomach ballooned to its very limits, grumbling audibly. I had never in my life consumed so much food.

Eventually, Roxy's fun-filled feeding frenzy came to an end, and Maya showed me to my guest room.

"I'm grateful you came," she said on the way. "It's been too long since we've seen Lady Roxy look so alive."

Given all the hardships in Lady Roxy's life—her father's sudden death in battle, her mother's illness, and her demanding new duties in the kingdom—the maids were fretting about her return and whether she was in good health. Seeing her delight for themselves was a powerful relief.

"Rest well, Fate," Maya said.

"Thank you," I said. "Goodnight."

I bowed politely to Maya and closed the door. My first day of work on the estate as a Hart family servant had ended without issue. It was time for my other job. I reached out and grasped what Maya brought to my room for me earlier: the black sword Greed.

*"Well, well, someone looks happy. You big softie. Better get your game face on if you don't want to end up as dinner for kobolds."*

"From what I've heard, kobolds are a level up from goblins, but nothing crazy. With my current stats, they shouldn't be an issue."

*"Pride goeth before the fall, my friend. But you did your research, didn't you?"*

"I did. Thoroughly."

During the day, while helping the people of the estate with grape picking, I had casually brought up kobolds. They were dangerous monsters that wrecked farmlands and attacked villagers at whim, so they were well-known to all.

Every year, the kobolds moved from a ravine to the north down to the estate. Just yesterday, someone had scouted the ravine and discovered a kobold group on the hunt. When I remarked on how dangerous it was to search such a place, a villager said it was actually quite safe, because the wind traveled from north to south. As long as you were careful, the kobolds wouldn't pick up your scent.

The people of the estate had spent years dealing with damage and loss wrought by kobolds. I suspected they were even more knowledgeable than seasoned adventurers when it came to these particular monsters.

With Greed in hand, I waited for midnight.

*"It's time," he said.*

"Let's go."

I padded out of the Hart mansion into a cloudless night. The moon shone full-faced on the ground below, the perfect conditions for a night hunt. I proceeded north up a narrow mountain path.

"Hey, Greed," I said. "I met a strange Galian today. A girl. She had the same eyes I do when Gluttony is starving."

*"Hm. I see. What did she call herself?"*

"I don't know. I couldn't use Identify on her. It was useless. Do you know what caused that?"

*"She's carrying something with her. Something special, unique. But, without a name, I can't give you any answers. Did she say anything else?"*

"She said we'd meet again."

*"Ha. Then you're bound to do so. Just forget about her until you do."*

"What do you mean?"

But Greed dropped into his trademark silence. He obviously knew more, but he wouldn't tell me anything when he got like this. There was nothing to do but drop the topic.

I focused on the mountain path. Occasionally, I heard rustling from the bushes. Rabbits, perhaps, or foxes. Monsters were more prone to leaping out to attack than staying hidden.

At length, Greed and I arrived at a short, wooded cliff overlooking the ravine.

"So this is where the kobolds come from."

*"Finally, we can kill something new. The goblins were getting so very monotonous."*

"After we're done scouting and gathering intel."

Even in the trees' shadows, hidden from the moonlight, Night Vision let me see everything. Wherever the kobolds came from, I would spot them from here.

After a short time, two kobolds appeared near the valley mouth, using the trees as cover. These dog-faced monsters bristled with bushy blue fur. Though they were canines that walked on two feet, they weren't the least bit cute. As they neared, they came into Identify's range, and I analyzed them. Both kobolds were the same.

***Kobold Junior, Lv 25***

***Vitality: 880***

***Strength: 890***

***Magic: 350***

***Spirit: 400***

***Agility: 780***

***Skill: Strength Boost (Medium)***

I changed Greed to his bow form and took aim. The magic arrow cut through the air with a whisper and hit the kobold straight in the forehead. One down.

***Gluttony skill activated. Stats increased: Vitality +880, Strength +890, Magic +350, Spirit +400, Agility +780. Skill added: Strength Boost (Medium)***

At the sight of its suddenly dead partner, the remaining kobold's eyes darted about. It tensed, preparing to lunge at whatever it saw, but I wouldn't give it the chance. I fired the second arrow. The kobold collapsed into the brush as the magic arrow passed through its forehead.

***Gluttony skill activated. Stats increased: Vitality +880, Strength +890, Magic +350, Spirit +400, Agility +780***

I waited a moment longer, but no more kobolds appeared. I was disappointed. Just two... I hungered for more.

"This is supposed to be the season for kobolds," I said. "They come through the ravine and into the Hart family estate. But there's not nearly enough of them."

*"My hunch is they're playing cautious," said Greed. "Every year, a holy knight drives them away, so they send the junior kobolds to scout ahead. They're probably biding their time and waiting for the opportune moment."*

"Ah, so that's what they're up to."

However, if they sent scouts and those scouts never returned, the kobolds might not come at all. The next time I climbed here, I'd have to give them more leeway before I acted.

My Gluttony was far from appeased, but there was no other choice—I had to endure it for now. Ignoring the hunger of my empty stomach, I returned to the path to the mansion.

## Chapter 17: The Deranged Dog Howl

**T**HE NEXT DAY started early, as it was the day of the grape harvest with all the villagers of Hart estate.

Lady Roxy finished a brisk breakfast and returned to her room. There was no need for me to get changed or to prepare anything in advance, so I waited for her near the mansion's entrance.

I didn't have to wait long. Lady Roxy arrived with her hair tied into a ponytail. Once again, she looked different from any other time I'd seen her. Her clothing was durable, ready for wear and tear. She struck me as a uniquely lovely farm girl.

In the past, Lady Roxy had dressed like a townspeople when we visited the Merchant District on her top secret inspection. Compared to that adventure, there was no flair to her present outfit. It was simple, yet the plain clothes seemed to draw out and highlight her beauty.

"Sorry to keep you waiting," she said. "Let's go. They'll be waiting for us."

"Okay."

I accompanied the enthusiastic Lady Roxy and we left. Greed stayed in my room. The Hart family estate was safe and secure, and there was no need to worry about bandits. Besides, Greed was for monster hunting; he would only get in the way of grape picking.

It was another one of those days of unrivaled pastoral beauty. As we walked through the vineyards, we saw the villagers had already begun. Lady Roxy approached the oldest person among them, an elderly woman.

"Thank you for everything you've already done," she said to the woman. "It looks like we're in for another good harvest."

"Well, well. Lady Roxy, it's you." The old woman bowed her head with great reverence.

Realizing the estate's young master had arrived, the villagers paused and gathered around; they brought large, juicy grapes, freshly picked. They wanted Lady Roxy to see the literal fruits of their labor, into which they had poured their time, care, and effort.

"My, the grapes are in wonderful condition this year, too," Lady Roxy added. "I could tell as soon as I saw the ones you sent to the manor in Seifort."

"We're grateful for your kind words, Lady Roxy." The old woman, who appeared to be in charge, passed a single grape to Lady Roxy with a delighted smile.

"Very well," Lady Roxy said, "just one. Oh, they're so sweet and luscious!"

The villagers were thrilled. Some actually jumped for joy. I could tell, in that instant, just how much they all adored her.

When Lady Roxy's welcome was over, the old woman sent everyone back to work. Then she noticed me standing next to Lady Roxy, and her face lit up in another smile.

"Ah, you must be Fate. I heard about you. The others said you were here all day yesterday, helping with the harvest. Lady Roxy's personal servants really are something."

"I... Well, let's not exaggerate," I mumbled, embarrassed. I still wasn't used to compliments.

However, Lady Roxy looked thoroughly pleased. "Fate is a servant I chose myself!" she said.

"Well, I'd expect nothing less of you, Lady Roxy. Shall we get started?"

"Yes! Fate, are you ready? Let's go!"

"After you, Lady Roxy!"

I worked as hard as I could. I didn't want to admit it was because I was in front of Lady Roxy, and wanted her to see my best side, but...there was a little of that, to be sure.

As expected of a holy knight, Lady Roxy's stats were a marvel to behold. She could hoist several baskets of grapes all by herself. Every time she did, the villagers let out a cheer.

Being in such a welcoming environment suddenly scared me. How long could I stay here, really? Should I even be at the estate at all? My Gluttony meant my future would be an endless battle. Could a person like me live in a place like this? Was a person like me necessary? When I followed this line of thought to its conclusion, I had a feeling that, sooner or later, a time would come when I had to leave Lady Roxy's side...and her protection.

When the harvest was complete, Lady Roxy and I walked back to the mansion. I offhandedly asked her something that had been on my mind since we arrived.

"Why are all the vineyards south of the estate? Barely anything's growing in the north."

"Oh... There used to be vineyards there, but kobolds razed the fields. I believe that happened in my great-grandfather's generation."

But if it had happened so long ago, then there had been more than enough time to regrow the vineyards. Yet they hadn't. Why?

"They say the kobold that came from the north that day was a wicked beast with silver fur," continued Lady Roxy. "Unfortunately, my great-grandfather was away from the estate at the time, and for that reason, the losses were especially great. The soil of the northern fields was stained with the blood of a great many villagers."

She looked toward the northern fields as she spoke. When I followed her gaze, I noticed that they were blanketed with flowers in a rainbow of colors. Ah, so they were a graveyard; they wouldn't be used as vineyards again.

"I do not wish to make the same mistake," Lady Roxy said.

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In the dead of night, I slipped out of the mansion. It would have been a lie to say I didn't feel a little guilty. But I had to do this, for my own sake—for my survival. If I neglected to hunt monsters and devour their souls, then within a week, my Gluttony would force me into starvation mode. If I let that go on too long, I would lash out at anyone to satiate it. The time and the place wouldn't matter.

If I didn't want to become a monster, I had to hunt them.

The gloom of clouds bathed the land, hiding the moonlight, but with Night Vision, my gaze was clear.

*As I hurried up the path to the ravine, Greed spoke. "What's bothering you, Fate? Something has made your thoughts murky today."*

*"How do you know? You don't have Telepathy."*

*"I can read it in your pulse. Well, what's bothering you?"*

I didn't want to say. Didn't want to ask whether I would someday have to leave Lady Roxy's side. And I didn't want to admit that the thought wouldn't leave my mind. I felt like, if I said it, I'd make it true.

*"You don't have to say anything if you don't want to," said Greed. "At any rate, that holy knight girl is running those kobolds out of here starting tomorrow, right? So you'd best get your fill of them tonight."*

*"Yes. That was the plan."*

I had only devoured two souls yesterday. If I didn't satisfy my hunger tonight, Lady Roxy would drive my meal away. Furthermore, since she planned to keep watch over the area for another two days after her hunt, she would force Gluttony to fast during that time. Even if I could endure that, I would have to go goblin hunting as soon as we returned to the kingdom. I would be walking on thin ice.

*"If I were a betting blade, I'd put my money on your going crazy with hunger on the way back. There's no way you would last that long."*

*"Would you quit it with the pessimism?"*

As I chewed Greed out for his bad sense of humor, we arrived at my wooded cliff perch before the ravine from the prior night. From there, I could see the entire northern ravine, and because I was downwind, the kobolds wouldn't catch my scent.

Hours passed. I wondered whether, by killing the two scouts, I had put the kobolds on edge. A yawn almost escaped my lips when Greed noticed something.

*"They're here."*

I squinted and spied two blue-furred kobolds sneaking down the ravine. Scouts. If I killed them now, the other kobolds wouldn't show. I slowed my breath and hid in wait. After checking the area, the two scouts disappeared back up the ravine.

*"And now the pack comes?"*

*"There is no doubt. They will come."*

Just as Greed predicted, the kobolds flowed down the ravine like a river of shuffling blue fur. There were at least fifty. Most were kobold juniors, but five looked much bigger. One, with silver fur instead of blue, was even larger than those.

*Greed sensed its danger immediately. "Something wicked this way comes. That there is a crowned beast."*

*"A crowned beast?"*

*"A monster with a unique name. Monsters like that are born out of accumulated hate, built up over many, many years. It'll be quickest just to Identify it and see for yourself."*

*I did as Greed suggested. What?! This thing's stats are...six digits?!*

***The One Called Howl***

***Kobold Warrior, Lv 50***

***Vitality: 200,000***

***Strength: 200,000***

***Magic: 125,000***

***Spirit: 135,000***

***Agility: 125,000***

***Skills: Brawl***

It was a kobold warrior, but it stood more than a cut above the rest. The name also differentiated it. So that was what Greed meant by a "crowned beast."

*"Fate, if that monster ventures onto the estate grounds, expect terrible things. See how it's flanked by four ordinary kobold warriors? Against them, a young holy knight on her own would be like a lamb in the slaughterhouse."*

*"You mean..."*

*"Yes. If you don't hold them back here, they'll wreak havoc."*

I took a deep breath and reviewed my own stats.

***Fate Graphite, Lv 1***

***Vitality: 50,201***

***Strength: 50,051***

***Magic: 23,501***

***Spirit: 23,501***

***Agility: 35,901***

***Skills: Gluttony, Identify, Telepathy, Conceal, Night Vision, One-Handed Sword Technique, Two-Handed Sword Technique, Strength Boost (Low), Strength Boost (Medium), Vitality Boost (Low), Vitality Boost (Medium), Health Regen***

The villages of the Hart family estate deserved protection. I gripped the black sword Greed tight...and made up my mind.

I would devour all of them, and I would leave no survivors.

## Chapter 18: Gluttony of Gluttonies

**I** KEPT A CLOSE EYE on the kobolds as I began to move.

*"Fate, do you have a plan in mind?"*

There was a hint of amusement in Greed's voice, like he already knew.

*"I'm going to fight like a starving man."*

*"Ah, you finally get it. It's about time you leveled up from regular old battle strategies. It's been a real pain watching you scrabble. Anybody can fight, but for us, it's like nibbling at crumbs. Far from gluttonous."*

I made sure to stay downwind of the kobolds and readied the black bow. My target was a kobold junior. The magic arrow pierced its eye with unparalleled accuracy.

***Gluttony skill activated. Stats increased: Vitality +880, Strength +890, Magic +350, Spirit +400, Agility +780***

The echo of the metallic voice in my head was a signal: the hunt was on.

I released a second and third arrow at the kobold juniors, and the droning voice informed me of my rising stats. The kobolds fell into disarray as they realized they were no longer safe. However, the crowned kobold let out a roar to silence them. It had determined my location, and it barked orders to the surrounding kobolds. As I expected, even though this crowned kobold was viciously strong, it was also exceedingly cautious. Its personality had been evident from the scouting parties it sent earlier.

The crowned kobold stood in place, unmoving. It sent two kobold warriors and ten kobold juniors to the area in which I hid.

*"They're coming. Time to get moving."*

*"Yeah."*

I silently retreated deeper into the trees. *Come to me. Follow the scent to your prize...*

I proceeded until I found a boulder and hid in its shadow. I knew they would find me; they would have no trouble following my scent. But I needed that; I needed them to find me. I needed them to take the bait.

*"They're here, Fate."*

I peeked my head out from behind the rock and analyzed a sinewy, muscular kobold warrior with Identify.

***Kobold Warrior, Lv 40***

***Vitality: 50,000***

***Strength: 50,000***

***Magic: 27,000***

***Spirit: 28,000***

***Agility: 45,000***

***Skills: Agility Boost (Medium)***



I beat them in terms of strength and vitality, but only by a little. That meant the kobold juniors were first on the menu.

The kobolds surrounded the boulder where I hid, and as they did, the first strike was mine. I leaped up on the boulder, letting loose multiple shots from the black bow. Five, six, seven kobold juniors perished. None would escape. The kobolds tried to run for cover, but the magic arrows chased them down. Every arrow hit its mark. All ten kobold juniors died in their attempt to corner me.

I'd learned from hunting goblins that even weak monsters could give you decent stats if you ate enough of them. I felt a smile curl upon my face as a familiar metallic voice echoed in my head. Only the two kobold warriors remained. I beat them in terms of stats now, but the difference wasn't profound. If I could take one out while they reeled in dismay at the loss of the juniors, the second one would be easy.

And delicious.

I jumped from the boulder and shifted Greed from black bow to black sword. The nearest kobold warrior, coming back to its senses, brought its right paw down in a swipe, aiming to shred me to pieces with its razor-sharp claws. Too slow. I evaded the strike and lunged forward, cutting the beast's trunk-like body in two. Blood sprayed into the air as the kobold warrior's torso slid to the ground.

***Gluttony skill activated. Stats increased: Vitality +50,000, Strength +50,000, Magic +27,000, Spirit +28,000, Agility +45,000. Skill added: Agility Boost (Medium)***

With these stats, beating the remaining kobold warrior would be a cakewalk. To me, the monster was now no different than a kobold junior, and just as easy to hunt. Instinctively sensing a change in my bloodthirsty aura, the kobold warrior crept backward, keeping distance between us. Then it turned and broke into a sprint, running on all fours. No doubt it meant to go crying to the crowned kobold for help.

*"Don't let it get away," Greed said.*

*"I won't."*

I transformed Greed back to the black bow and fired several arrows at the kobold warrior; its tail whipped as it ran. The arrows pierced the back of the kobold's head one after another, ending its life before it had a chance to make a sound.

***Gluttony skill activated. Stats increased: Vitality +50,000, Strength +50,000, Magic +27,000, Spirit +28,000, Agility +45,000***

An immense rush of satisfaction surged through me, as though Gluttony itself reveled in the feast. I grappled to control the pulsing joy as I analyzed my current stats.

***Fate Graphite, Lv 1***

***Vitality: 161,641***

***Strength: 161,621***

***Magic: 82,051***

***Spirit: 84,701***

***Agility: 136,041***

***Skills: Gluttony, Identify, Telepathy, Conceal, Night Vision, One-Handed Sword Technique, Two-Handed Sword Technique, Strength Boost (Low), Strength Boost (Medium), Vitality Boost (Low), Vitality Boost (Medium), Agility Boost (Medium), Health Regen***

I was creeping toward the crowned kobold's stats. One more kobold warrior, and we would be about even.

I headed back toward the ravine and the waiting crowned kobold, this time by a different route. I peeked through the trees as I went. The kobolds were still at the ready, now in a battle formation surrounding their leader. The crowned kobold was nothing if not wary.

*You can wait as long as you want, I thought, but your underlings won't be back. They were a meal, and now their power is mine, and I will use it to kill you.*

I pulled the string of the black bow and released a magic arrow. It twisted and turned as it sped through the trees, ignoring the kobold juniors as it neared a kobold warrior in the middle of the formation.

But just as it was about to sink into the kobold's neck, it stopped. The crowned kobold caught the arrow in its bare hand.

*How is that even...?* I gulped, and sweat rolled down my forehead. I ducked into the long grass beneath the trees, quieting my breath as I hid from sight.

***"GRAAAAHHHHHH!"***

I couldn't see the crowned kobold, but I heard its roar. Did it already know where I was? I peeked out again and saw it stomping around the battle formation, its ears pointed up on alert. Then it turned toward my cliff and stopped.

*Damn it. It knows where I am.*

The crowned kobold unleashed another roar and glowered at me across the distance. The kobolds surrounding it now knew where I was too, and they let out menacing howls.

This was bad. My stats were still a long way from matching the crowned kobold's, and if it came to combat at close quarters, the odds weren't in my favor: there were thirty-five kobold juniors, two kobold warriors, and The One Called Howl.

But I couldn't run, either. If the kobolds beat me, it would strengthen their resolve, and their attacks on the estate would grow more vicious. I thought of the faces of the villagers I had spent the day picking grapes with. The smiles and joy. The kindness with which they accepted a novice like me. Each of their faces passed through my mind, and at the center of them was Lady Roxy, smiling as she offered me her hand.

I gripped the black bow. I didn't want to lose any of them. Power surged through my body with that thought.

"Prepare for battle, Greed!" I shouted.

*"I knew you'd say that. Avoid the crowned kobold, and concentrate on picking off the formation!"*

Greed did not advise me to retreat. He knew how I felt and understood my message loud and clear. All that was left was to win!

The two kobold warriors on either side of the crowned kobold were difficult targets, being protected. My only option was to start by feasting on the kobold juniors to steadily raise my stats.

Now that the crowned kobold had given away my position, there was no use hiding. I stood up from the grass, readied the black bow, and fired as many shots as I could, every one of them at a kobold junior.

***Gluttony skill activated. Stats increased: Vitality +10,560, Strength +10,680, Magic +4,200, Spirit +4,800, Agility +9,360***

Twelve down. Not enough. I hungered for more.

Now that it had seen the black bow's attacks, the crowned kobold knew the pack's current location in the ravine made them all easy targets. It sent the kobold juniors into the forests on the left and right.

The juniors tore through the rustling grass toward me, darting between trees and keeping out of sight. If my concentration slipped for an instant, they would have me surrounded. Arms crossed, the crowned kobold watched from the ravine.

There was only one place for me to go: straight at the crowned kobold and its two kobold warriors. Now that the remaining kobold juniors had spread out and dispersed, this was my chance. Even if it was a trap, it was better than standing still and letting them come to me.

*Through my Telepathy, I could tell Greed felt the same. His powerful voice echoed through me. "Fate! Keep the crowned kobold occupied with the bow, then cut it down at close quarters with the black sword."*

"Easy for you to say. You're not the one that has to fight it."

*"Ha. But what choice do you have?"*

"None."

I leapt from my position, black bow at the ready. I fired my first shot as I ran, a message sent straight to the crowned kobold's forehead. Without missing a beat, I fired a second arrow, this one aimed at the neck of the kobold warrior standing to the right of its leader. The crowned kobold stopped both arrows, swiping away the one aimed at its head and catching the one aimed at its minion.

*What the hell kind of reaction speed is that?!*

The crowned kobold sent me a snarling grin as it snapped the black arrow in its hand. The arrow, made of magical energy, dissipated into light particles and vanished. Frontal attacks with the bow were useless. They worked on lower-ranked enemies, but not this crowned monstrosity. It saw every arrow and stopped them without trouble, even the ones I had fired from hiding. Direct attacks meant nothing to it. But I wasn't going to stop.

I fired arrow after arrow, and the crowned kobold knocked away every single one. It moved with a grace and skill that contrasted with its hulking body. But I only needed to keep it occupied long enough to close in. Then I could use the black sword.

My target was either of the kobold warriors. If I devoured one of their souls, it would raise my stats to just above the crowned kobold's. That was the only way to quickly bring the odds into my favor and even the playing field.

"GRAAAAAHHHHHH!"

The crowned kobold roared, and the twenty-three kobold juniors hidden in the forest raised their heads. They dashed in to surround me.

I had expected this. The difference had only ever been in whether I waited for them to come to me, or whether I *planned* for them to come to me. The situation now, where I was battle-ready, was vastly superior. On top of that, the timing was perfect, because I could *use* the kobold juniors.

I sent the black sword through the chest of an incoming kobold junior and charged with its body toward the crowned kobold.

***Gluttony skill activated. Stats increased: Vitality +880, Strength +890, Magic +350, Spirit +400, Agility +780***

The crowned kobold glared as I closed in. I swung my sword, launching the junior at The One Called Howl's face as I hid in the flying corpse's shadow. The crowned kobold growled in irritation as it tore the body to pieces with its claws. Then it turned on its heel and launched a second attack behind it, toward where I now stood.

"Ugh!"

A sharp pain ran through my left shoulder. The crowned kobold's claws had slashed through it. In return for that pain, though, I had gotten close enough to launch an attack on the kobold warrior to the crowned kobold's right.

It was time to eat.

The kobold warrior showed its fangs as it attacked, but it was no match for me. I brought the black sword down with my right hand and sliced the kobold in two.

***Gluttony skill activated. Stats increased: Vitality +50,000, Strength +50,000, Magic +27,000, Spirit +28,000, Agility +45,000***

As the metallic voice spoke in my head, my stats grew. I now had the power to take the crowned kobold's attacks. As it bore down on me from behind, I turned and stopped it with the black sword.

The attack was heavy. Even though my stats were a touch higher, the difference between the crowned kobold and I was minimal. The One Called Howl was still far larger than me. The kobold's attack pushed me back; its massive bodyweight threw me. I had intended to stop the attack, but it sent me flying. I smashed into one of the huge rocks behind me.

The attack knocked the wind out of me, and my consciousness pulsed white. Greed set alarm bells ringing through my Telepathy.

*"Wake up, Fate!"*

Greed's voice brought my vision front and center to the approaching crowned kobold and his remaining kobold warrior. Now that they had me pinned, they would push in to continue their attack.

I rolled on the ground, just barely evading the crowned kobold's next blow, which shattered the rock it had thrown me into. As I watched the stone turn to dust, however, I realized that "shattered" was too light a word. The crowned kobold's attack completely pulverized the rock.

The monster's destructive power was unbelievable. If I was hit by that strike, I was, without a doubt, dead. Still stunned, I didn't realize that when I rolled out of the way, the kobold warrior's kick was waiting for me. It struck me so hard I thought my spine would break.

It made me think of the Vlerick family, and of Rafale. It made me think of how I had worked in their place, and the excuses they'd bandied to inflict their violence on me. If I could take torture like that day after day, I could take this!

I gripped the kobold warrior's leg, and with all the power I could muster, I tore the limb straight off. Then I snatched the black sword up from the ground where it had fallen and put an end to the beast.

***Gluttony skill activated. Stats increased: Vitality +50,000, Strength +50,000, Magic +27,000, Spirit +28,000, Agility +45,000***

*I haven't just reached your level now, I thought. I have surpassed it.*

My wounded shoulder was healing thanks to Health Regen. A most valuable skill.

This new feast had filled me with a bounty of power, and I analyzed my stats with Identify.

***Fate Graphite, Lv 1***

***Vitality: 272,201***

***Strength: 272,301***

***Magic: 140,251***

***Spirit: 145,501***

***Agility: 235,401***

***Skills: Gluttony, Identify, Telepathy, Conceal, Night Vision, One-Handed Sword Technique, Two-Handed Sword Technique, Strength Boost (Low), Strength Boost (Medium), Vitality Boost (Low), Vitality Boost (Medium), Agility Boost (Medium), Health Regen***

With all the kobold warriors dead, the kobold juniors shook with fear and doubt. Their formation broke. They were dogs, in the end, and powerless against their instinctive fear.

Keeping my distance, I turned to face the crowned kobold, abandoned as the kobold juniors scattered. It glared at me with pure loathing.

## Chapter 19: A Greedy Way to Go

**T**HE CROWNED KOBOLD was unlike its companions. Even though it sensed my higher stats, its fighting spirit refused to waver. A vital hate flooded from its sharp, half-moon eyes. *I will kill you, they said, even if it means we both go down.*

By and large, the crowned kobold had a careful nature. But here and now, with its back against the wall, it had changed. For a time we stayed still, eyes locked. Using Identify, I analyzed the monster's skill.

***Brawl: Increases attack power for close-quarters combat. Unlocks the organ-crushing tech-art "Ruinous Strike."***

So that was Brawl's tech-art. I had witnessed it when the crowned kobold turned that boulder into dust. Despite my higher stats, at close range, I would lose if I took more than one hit from that attack. My bones would be powder, and I would be dead. The key was to stay out of range.

*"Fate, let's end this quickly," Greed said. "With your current stats, you can access my First Level secret technique, Bloody Ptarmigan."*

*"You have a secret technique?!"*

*"I do. With it, you can end this boring back-and-forth and blow this beast sky high."*

I kept careful watch on the crowned kobold as I spoke. "What do I have to do?"

*"Simple. Give me ten percent of your stats. All of them."*

When I unlocked the First Level, I had lost almost the entirety of my stats. Now, to use a secret technique, I had to give a portion of them up? Ten percent for access? This black sword was as greedy as its name implied.

*"Bring it down to five percent, and you've got yourself a deal."*

*"No can do. The minimum is ten percent. You want a stronger attack, you give me more stats."*

*"Stingy, aren't you?"*

*Greed laughed. "My name should tell you all you need to know."*

Just how many more of my stats would the black sword take before he was satisfied? His greed was a bottomless pit. At the same time, I wanted to avoid close-quarters combat, if at all possible. The crowned kobold was more experienced in battle. If I threw myself into a full-on assault, it might catch me with a Ruinous Strike. That would mean bye-bye to my internal organs. But if I kept my distance with the black bow, the kobold would knock Greed's arrows away. I'd seen as much earlier. Still, there was no other choice. I changed the black sword to the black bow and fired a single shot, which doubled as a threat.

The crowned kobold seized the neck of a nearby kobold junior and used it as a shield against the magic arrow. The junior frothed at the mouth as it died.

***Gluttony skill activated. Stats increased: Vitality +880, Strength +890, Magic +350, Spirit +400, Agility +780***

I made up my mind. "Fine. Do it, Greed!"

*"That's my boy. Ten percent of your stats... I am going to enjoy this!"*

My stats left my body in a cold rush through my left hand.

Immediately, the black bow changed before my eyes, growing dramatically larger and more ominous.

So this was what happened when Greed absorbed my power. Even as the black bow's wielder, I felt unfathomable pressure emanate from the change; it was impossible to ignore. This had exceeded the scale of any ordinary weapon. It was something *more*.

*"Drop the stupid look and get to it. The crowned kobold won't wait."*

*"Then let's finish this."*

*"Shoot arrows just like you always do. Pull and release! The bow will take care of the rest."*

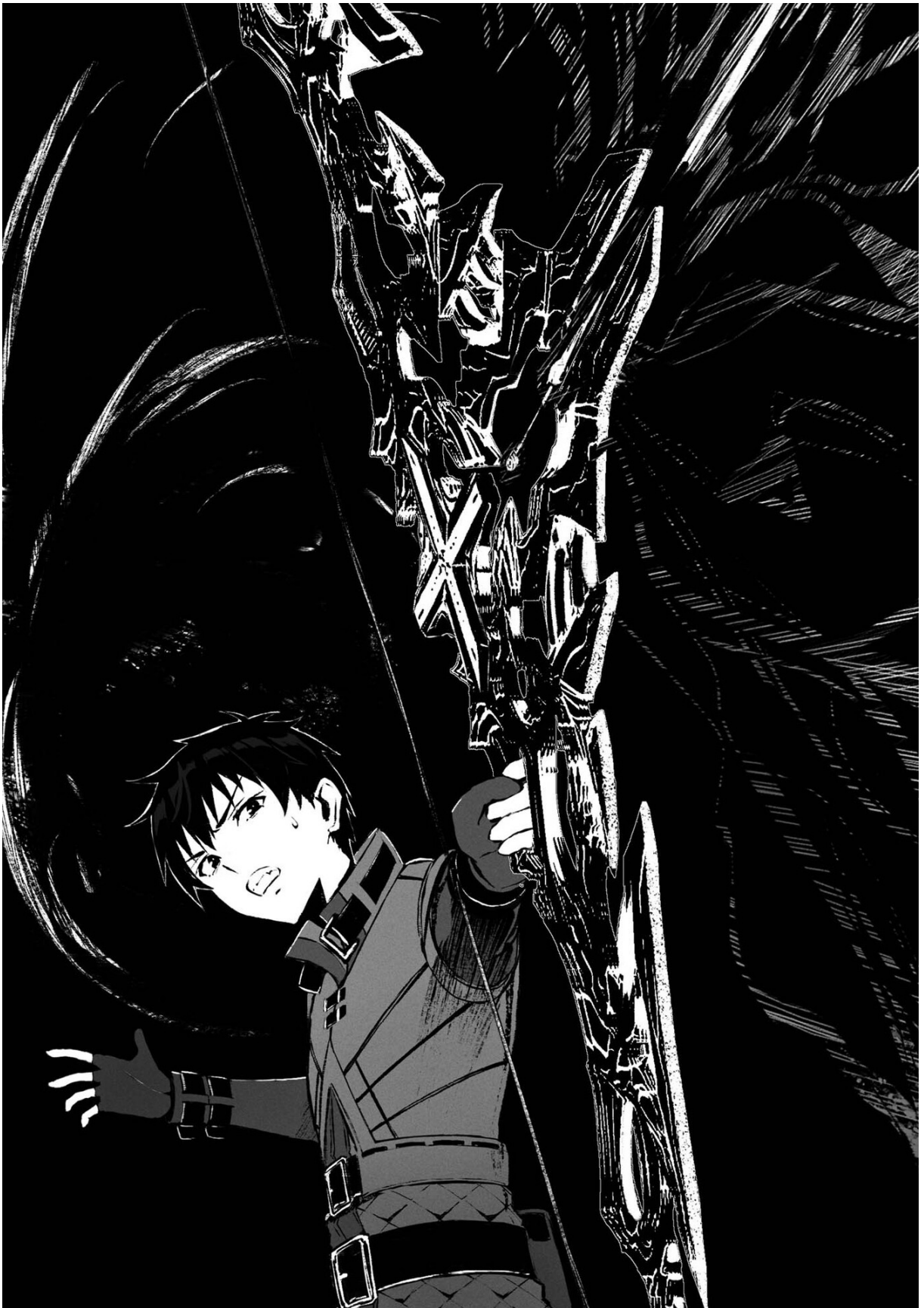
My amplified weapon was immensely powerful, and it was my last shot. If the bow didn't cut it, there was no way I could handle the crowned kobold on my own.

Just as Greed had warned, the crowned kobold moved. It meant to attack me, regardless of the black bow's transformation. The monster raised its thick arms as a shield and charged. Even if it lost its arms, it could tear out my throat with its fangs, or otherwise finish me with kicks from its Ruinous Strike. This was a kamikaze attack.

Time to put both of us to the test, and find out if the crowned kobold could withstand the force of the transformed black bow's power.

*"Fate! Fire!"*

In time with Greed's call, I launched the Bloody Ptarmigan attack. The kickback was incredible, and the force pushed me backward. An arrow launched from the bow with a scream of lightning and turned into a thick column of darkness, which swallowed the crowned kobold and washed over the remaining kobold juniors as they scrambled to escape. The ravine turned into a great river of shadow.







All that remained after the attack were deep scars across the land. Not a single trace of kobold, not even a strand of hair. But I knew from the metallic voice ringing in my head that the crowned kobold had been annihilated.

***Gluttony skill activated. Stats increased: Vitality +218,480, Strength +218,690, Magic +132,350, Spirit +143,400, Agility +141,380. Skill added: Brawl***

Its power spent, the black bow slowly returned to the form I was most accustomed to.

*It's over.* I let out a relieved breath, but I was suddenly struck by a euphoria that surged through my body, produced by the soul I had just devoured. The elation coursing through me was so intense it hurt.

I screamed. I had to let it out. *Why...?*

I was left writhing on the ground in rapturous satisfaction as the feeling clawed up my throat. This wasn't just joy. The feeling welling in my body was *madness*. Feasting upon the soul of the crowned kobold gave my Gluttony such pleasure that it hurt; I was losing myself.

Somewhere within the delirious haze, I heard Greed.

*"Fate, you must endure! If you can't, you'll end up in a state similar to starvation, or worse. You must endure!"*

*"Easy for you...to say... This is..."*

I bashed my head into a nearby rock in an attempt to keep my thoughts straight, heaving as I begged the waves of Gluttony to subside.

*"Looks like the worst is over," Greed said.*

*"Yeah, that was the worst. Is it always going to feel like that when I take down a crowned beast?"*

I wiped the drool away from the corners of my mouth and put a hand to my forehead wound. Health Regen had taken care of it. It was so reassuring to carry that ability into battle.

*"Your body is simply reacting to the first high-quality soul it has ever eaten. Now that you've tasted it, Gluttony won't go mad with ecstasy again. That said, who knows what'll happen if you eat something at the level of the Divine Dragon?"*

*"The living embodiment of heavenly calamity?! There's no way I'm going to be able to eat something like that!"*

Greed laughed. *"Maybe."*

I sagged in place and looked up at the sky. The moon peeked out from behind the clouds, and moonlight bathed the land. I had stopped the kobolds' advance, but as the moonlight brought clarity, the state of the ravine left me dumbfounded.

*"By the gods. We. Wrecked. Everything. This ravine was so beautiful before, but now..."*

*"Nothing to worry about," said Greed. "To win the battle you may as well make it total domination. This is a prime example. Right, Fate?"*

“What’re we going to do about...all of this? When the others see this tomorrow, they’re going to freak out.”

*“It’s not a problem, Fate. In a thousand years, the shape of the land will be nigh unrecognizable. So you decimated the ravine. So what? You’re overreacting. Even a century, and it will be good as new.”*

It seemed pretty clear that for Greed, an inorganic object, time flowed in a very different manner. *A century? But what am I going to do about all this...this desecration...now?*

Trees had fallen to the ground, uprooted. The once vibrant natural beauty of the ravine was now a portrait of tragedy. I had saved Lady Roxy’s family estate from disaster, but...how in the world was I going to save what had become of the land itself?

Not a single good idea came to mind.

## Chapter 20: An Oath, a Promise

**S**OMEHOW, I MADE IT BACK to the Hart mansion before dawn. I was utterly exhausted, both by the battle with the crowned kobold and by the ecstasy of madness Gluttony brought on afterward. I leaned Greed against the table in my room and collapsed into bed. Sleep arrived instantly.

I woke to sunlight pouring in through the windows.

*Hm? Wait. If the sun's up that high, that means...it must be noon already! Did I sleep all morning?*

I scrambled out of bed, got dressed, and burst out of my room. Maya happened to be passing by at the time, and she laughed at the sight of me.

"Hello there, sleepyhead. Finally decided to wake up? Keep this up, and you won't be working for Lady Roxy long."

"No! Anything but that... Where is Lady Roxy, anyway? I have to find her and apologize."

Maya seemed to enjoy watching me get all anxious.

*What the hell? I could lose my job, and you think it's funny?!*

"Sorry for laughing. It's just that you look so much like an abandoned puppy. It's adorably funny," Maya giggled. "Forgive me. Where are my manners? Please, rest easy. I was only joking."

"What do you mean?"

"Lady Roxy ordered us to let you sleep."

Maya explained that Lady Roxy had been worried when I didn't wake naturally in the morning, and even came to check on me herself. She knocked on the door but received no reply. Afraid something might have happened, Lady Roxy opened the door to find me splayed out on my bed, mouth wide open as I slept. Assuming I was exhausted from the previous day's grape picking, she ordered the maids to let me sleep until I woke up on my own.

Although I had actually spent the night locked in battle with the crowned kobold, that wasn't something I could go explaining to anyone, so I held my tongue.

"Ah, I see," I muttered.

"Now that you have Lady Roxy's express permission, you can go right back to bed, if you feel like it."

"No, no, I'm fine. I've had my fill of it."

Lady Roxy had already allowed me to sleep in; going back to bed was pushing it. First things first, I had to find her and apologize.

"Where is my lady?" I asked.

"Surely you heard yesterday. Lady Roxy took a group of battle-ready men to hunt kobolds."

So she had already left...for the decimated remains of the ravine. She might be staring at it in shock as Maya and I spoke. And what conclusion

would Lady Roxy come to about how the ravine got that way? I was worried, but I knew there was no proof I had been there, so for now I had to act normal.

“And when is Lady Roxy expected to return?”

“If it’s anything like previous years, tomorrow morning. Kobolds are nocturnal monsters, so she’ll spend the day setting traps, then hunt until dawn.”

“Tomorrow, you say...”

I was sure Lady Roxy would return later this very day. She would see the ruins of the ravine and know something had battled the kobolds. If any kobolds had somehow escaped, they wouldn’t attack the Hart estate after that disaster. Lady Roxy drove them off every year, so she knew them well enough to easily assess that sort of thing.

There would be a commotion upon her return, so I needed to prepare.

“You really like her, don’t you?” Maya said, interrupting my thoughts. “Lady Roxy, I mean.”

“Eh?! What are you talking about?!”

The comment took me by such surprise that my voice came out as a squeal. I was a servant being considerate of his master!

“You’re so eager—and nervous,” she laughed. “But it’s fine.”

Maya found my reaction hilarious. Hiding her laughter with a hand, she returned to work.

“Wait a moment!” I said. “Is there anything I can do to help?”

I wanted a chance to make up for sleeping so long. They kept treating me like a guest, but I was still one of Lady Roxy’s servants. I couldn’t sit around earning money for doing nothing.

Seeing how keen I was, Maya tilted her head in thought. “Why don’t you go keep Lady Aisha company? She doesn’t have anything to do.”

“Understood! I’ll do my best!”

After Maya told me where to find Lady Aisha, I gave her polite thanks and took off.

“Hey!” Maya called. “No running in the corridors! What if you bump into somebody?!”

“Sorry!”

Having just broken one of the most basic rules of servant work, I bowed in apology to Maya and walked briskly down the hall.

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Lady Aisha was in her room. It was immediately apparent that this was not a guest room like my own; the high quality of the door I knocked on spoke for itself. After a pause, a voice invited me in.

“Excuse me,” I said as I entered.

Lady Aisha greeted me with the smile of a cheeky young girl. “Ah, Fate. Wonderful timing. Sitting around gazing at the scenery gets frightfully boring after a while.”

She was resting in bed, her body propped up on the pillows behind her. She seemed tired.

"Come, take a seat," she added.

I sat in the chair Lady Aisha motioned toward, by the bedside. She smiled as I did, then turned her gaze back out the window. For a while, the two of us sat, simply admiring the garden grounds. Having spent time with Hart Manor's gardeners, I could tell the estate's lawns were immaculately kept. The gardeners seemed to hold the Hart family in high regard.

"It's a beautiful garden," I said.

"It is, particularly everything visible from this window. I always tell the old gardener not to bother going to all the trouble, and yet he always does."

Now it made sense. The gardener knew Lady Aisha was ill, and that she couldn't go outside often. The garden was his way of making her life indoors a little brighter.

"He's so troublesome..." she said, but her smile was grateful.

For a time, Lady Aisha and I chatted, and the time passed with our constant laughter. When my stomach rumbled from missing breakfast, Lady Aisha called a maid to bring us snacks. Something like a mother's warmth emanated from her. Although my own mother had passed away soon after I was born, so I couldn't say I knew exactly what such kindness was, I felt something from Lady Aisha. It was selflessness.

Lady Aisha placed her teacup on its saucer and faced me with a serious look on her face. "Fate, it's likely that I...don't have long left."

"Of course you do. Why, right now you're..." But I couldn't say it. I couldn't say she was fine. Even now, she was still stuck in bed.

Lady Aisha picked up where I left off. "Yes, right now I'm well enough. But it won't be long. After all, nobody knows us better than we know ourselves."

"But...why are you telling me this?"

"Because I think you can be the support that Roxy needs. Can I ask that of you?"

I was flustered and more than a little lost. Lady Aisha went on to tell me that when her husband had died in battle, it was a moment of great distress for her daughter. However, when I became a member of the greater Hart family, I had become a source of comfort and strength for Lady Roxy. Lady Roxy had told her mother so when they were alone. She'd said, "I have to keep going. I don't want Fate to think of me as an unworthy family head."

"If you could have just seen her eyes when she said that," Lady Aisha told me. "She looked just like her father did in his youth."

"But a person like me..."

Our positions in this world were too far apart. Even though I now possessed true strength, I could never show it. Of course, I could support

Lady Roxy from the shadows, but that didn't feel like what Lady Aisha was asking of me.

Seeing my confusion, Lady Aisha placed her hand upon my own. With Telepathy, I heard her voice flow through me.

*"You'll be fine... It's not so hard."*

Her voice faded as she lifted her hand, and she spoke to me once more.

"You don't need position or status, Fate. And you don't need to be as strong as a holy knight, either. What's important is what's here," she said, pointing at my chest. "What's important is that your heart wants to support her."

"My heart... My feelings, you mean?"

"Yes. Look at me, Fate. I came from a family of commoners, without a useful skill to my name. But I was there for my husband, a great and powerful holy knight. And if I could support him, then you can support her. That's what I believe."

There was no doubt in my mind that Lady Aisha's heart, even struck by illness, was stronger than my own. Her words weighed on me. Since unleashing Gluttony, I had sought power and strength. I hoped I could someday be as strong as her.

## Chapter 21: At the Crossroads

I THOUGHT A GREAT DEAL about Lady Aisha's words, and time seemed to pass in an instant. Before I knew it, it was evening. Lady Aisha needed rest and fell asleep, so I was once again left with nothing to do.

I returned to my room, head still churning, when the mansion filled with a sudden commotion. I went to investigate and found Lady Roxy had arrived home earlier than anticipated.

Having expected their master back the following morning, the maids were in a panic, rushing around preparing Lady Roxy's dinner and evening bath. I hurried toward Roxy among a throng of bustling maids. I needed to know as soon as possible what she thought of the ravine when she saw it on her kobold hunt.

I found Lady Roxy at the mansion's entrance, taking off her white light armor.

"Lady Roxy! Welcome home."

"Ah, Fate. It's good to see you."

However, something was evidently on her mind. I had a feeling I knew what. In any case, it was clear from her return that she had decided the kobolds were no longer a threat.

Still, I had to ask, my heart racing: "What happened, Lady Roxy? You're back earlier than planned."

"Well, about that..."

After removing the last of her armor, Lady Roxy told me of the confusing sight that had greeted her earlier. In the morning, she had taken a group of experienced hands to the ravine, but had found it razed to the ground by some kind of powerful attack. The natural landscape was devastated, the trees uprooted and the ground hollowed out.

It was like nothing she had ever seen on any previous hunt. Even I thought I'd gone too far, so it must have been quite the surprise for Lady Roxy. She sent her men to do an immediate investigation of the area, but nothing remained to help her understand what had occurred. It was as if everything in the ravine had been blown away.

However, at a large rock some distance from the valley, her men discovered the dead bodies of ten kobold juniors and two kobold warriors. Upon inspecting the location herself, Lady Roxy found they were left on the ground, dead from sword and arrow wounds. There were no signs of losses on the side of the kobolds' opponents; the battle had been one-sided.

The sight was particularly surprising because of the kobold warriors' presence. These beasts were strong and not easily felled by anyone less than a holy knight. But one of the kobold warriors has been cut in half. The other had clearly attempted to run away in fear only to be shot through the back of the head. Even more curious, the arrow itself was nowhere to be



found. Only the wound remained, but there was no sign any arrow had been removed. The only arrow that could leave such wounds was magical in nature, and weapons that turned magical energy into projectiles were powerful. They were not wielded by ordinary adventurers.

I had no idea magic bows were so strong.

"Eventually, I came to a conclusion," Lady Roxy said.

"Huh? And...what was that...?" I asked.

From these scraps of evidence, what conclusion could she have reached? She couldn't possibly know it was me...right?

"I think it might have been the Galian girl we saw yesterday."

Lady Roxy had identified a most unexpected culprit. However, it felt a little...forced. I must have looked dissatisfied, because Lady Roxy's cheeks puffed up as she looked at me.

"I know I don't have any way to confirm it, but what else am I supposed to tell the villagers?! I have to give them an explanation they can understand."

Lady Roxy needed to bring the locals calm and confidence. *Something* had destroyed the ravine and laid waste to the kobolds. Yet there was nothing left at the scene of the battle to identify what that something was.

So the Galian girl was a last-resort scapegoat. The Galian people had once ruled Galia with great martial prowess. According to old scriptures, a Galian warrior's strength exceeded that of a holy knight. If this girl had such power, it wasn't a stretch to imagine her being responsible for what had occurred at the ravine. It still took some leaps of logic, but Lady Roxy just needed to put the villagers' hearts at ease. All the same, I could tell the person most dissatisfied with this answer was Lady Roxy herself.

"Ah, I see," I said. "I'm so sorry, Lady Roxy."

"Why would you have any need to apologize, Fate?"

"Huh? Oh, uh, I just feel like I should," I replied, laughing nervously.

*That was a close one.* Seeing Lady Roxy's frustrated face almost made me confess to the whole thing.

I also hadn't known the Galian were once so strong. Then again, the girl *had* said I could have the kobolds, as if she was reluctantly giving me a gift. It made me wonder. If she hadn't met me, perhaps she would indeed have taken the kobolds down herself. In that case, it was best to leave Lady Roxy's story as it was: the girl had defeated the kobolds and wrecked the ravine. The girl had said I owed her for it, so I would have to make sure I paid her back whenever I saw her next.

I said a silent thank-you to that nameless Galian girl.

It wasn't the cleanest way to wrap things up, but if it meant the people of the Hart estate could go back to their ordinary lives, it was good enough. However, Lady Roxy still looked troubled.

"Several villagers saw the girl leave the estate borders early this morning," she said, "which means there's no chance to ask her why she came or what she did. I feel awful for using her like this..."

"Lady Roxy..."

Really, I was the one who felt awful. I couldn't tell Lady Roxy the truth about my Gluttony. I didn't want her to know I'd killed all the kobolds and stolen their power. Especially not the latter.

"Fate, what's wrong? You look upset."

"Oh? Really?"

"You make that face sometimes. Please, don't hesitate to let me know if anything worries you."

"Thank you, Lady Roxy."

Those were the only words I could give her in response.

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Lady Roxy returned to the ravine over the next couple days to ensure the kobolds wouldn't return. Afterward, she said: whatever attacked the kobolds that day, it might have wiped them out completely. If there were any survivors, it was likely they wouldn't revisit the Hart family estate ever again.

With her work at the estate complete, Lady Roxy and I were set to return to the kingdom. Lady Aisha came to the entrance with the help of her maids to see us off as we boarded the carriage.

"Farewell, mother."

"Be safe. If there's ever any free time in your schedule, you're always welcome home."

"Thank you. Look after yourself, please."

"I will. I have a little energy in me yet." Lady Aisha glanced at me, a sly light in her eyes. "And I hope you will be with her when she returns, Fate. And I hope you will have an answer for me when we next speak."

"I will..."

It was the answer I had not been able to admit, a promise on pause. Two forces pulled me in opposite directions: the feelings in my heart, and the reality of my situation. I left my feelings behind, there at the mansion, and I boarded the carriage headed for the kingdom.

## Chapter 22: Bright Blue Skies

**W**E WERE ON THE ROAD back to Seifort. I sat facing Lady Roxy, fighting desperately to suppress the throbbing pain of Gluttony's thirst for souls. A cold sweat bathed my skin. One small slip, and Gluttony might devour my mind. It was exactly as Greed had predicted.

Lady Roxy and I arrived at the kingdom at sunset. One of the castle's servants was waiting for her when we reached the manor, so she left immediately. There was never any rest for a holy knight from one of the five esteemed families.

For myself, I was swept up by the gardeners of Hart Manor. They wanted to know everything about the Hart estate's grounds, right down to the roots of its plants. It struck me then that the gardeners at the manor and the estate saw each other as rivals. I told them the estate's gardens were immaculate, particularly the view from Lady Aisha's room.

"Those guys are always so meticulous," the gardeners said, earnestly praising their competitors.

As it was already past sundown, my gardening duties wouldn't resume until the following day. Once we debriefed, the gardeners and I ate dinner together and crowded into the bath.

As we soaked, one of them turned to me. "You know, I think it's about time we taught you how to prune the trees. What do you think? Want to give it a shot?"

"Really?!"

"Fate, my boy, you're a hard worker. We're all in agreement that it's worth teaching you."

"Thank you!"

The gardeners had been thinking of me while I was away at the estate. They'd said before they were getting older and wanted to train a successor. Now, that successor was me. It was such an honor. I was so joyful that when I scrubbed one old gardener's back, I put a little too much strength into it, and he snapped at me.

"Ouch! Hey, easy there, Fate! I'm not getting any younger!"

"Sorry!"

Because my stats were so high compared to these common folk, I tried to be careful, but the gardeners' compliment made me accidentally let out too much power. I had to be more vigilant. You could moderate stat effects on the body through willpower. Without rigid mental control, holy knights would kill people regularly on account of their high stats.

Now that I had consumed the crowned kobold, I was stronger than a rookie holy knight, so I had to start thinking about training to control my stats. Then again, each time I upgraded Greed, it was always going to send me back to square one. In any case, as long as I had Gluttony, I couldn't

avoid sudden fluctuations in my stat levels. Washing the old gardener's back was a good chance to practice.

"Ouch! What're you doing back there?!"

"Oh, sorry!"

"I'm just a little old man, Fate. Be more attentive, would you?"

With each slip in concentration, I lost control of my stats. It was going to be a while before doing so became second nature.

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In the dead of night, I donned my skull mask and went out as I always did to where the goblins roamed. That night, I headed to Hobgoblin Forest. I had fasted at the Hart estate for two days, and Gluttony craved sustenance.

Even in the murky darkness of the forest, the hobgoblins were easy to spot with my Night Vision. I spared none on my hunt, not even those sleeping amongst the roots of the trees.

***Gluttony skill activated. Stats increased: Vitality +440, Strength +220, Magic +110, Spirit +110, Agility +110***

I heard that metallic voice countless times, but the hunger remained. I was at the limit for goblins and hobgoblins. Until recently, goblin hunting had been enough to satiate my Gluttony, but I had an idea of what was happening.

*Greed made it clear. "Gluttony knows the taste of a crowned beast now," he said. "It won't be satisfied by anything less."*

"But I won't get hungrier than this if I keep hunting, right...?"

*"Fate, of course it's going to get worse. You know this better than anyone."*

I should never have fed Gluttony something as delicious as a crowned monster. If I'd known this was going to happen, I would have fed it a full course of goblins instead. However, there had been no avoiding the crowned kobold. If I'd done nothing, it would have wrought havoc on the Hart family estate. I was glad to have killed it, but now I was stuck with an entirely new predicament.

"Ugh...my right eye is burning."

It happened just after I killed my tenth hobgoblin. I looked at myself in the blade of the black sword, and saw it in the reflection of the skull mask that stared back at me.

"It's just like you said, Greed... It's getting worse."

*"I told you. It comes out most clearly in the eyes."*

In the blade of the black sword, a bright-red eye stared back at me. My left eye was black, but my right had turned so red it was repulsive. This color meant only one thing...

*"Gluttony is starved," Greed said. "It is only a matter of time."*

I could feel it, too. It wouldn't be long before the monsters near the kingdom—goblins—would no longer sustain my Gluttony. And the Gluttony that crawled within me...it would not wait.

*"It's time to go, Fate. The time you knew would come...it's here. And you don't have long."*

"What time is that?" I knew the answer, but I turned the question back on Greed.

*"The time to decide your future."*

I said nothing and headed back to the kingdom. I encountered several adventurers along the way, but paid no mind to any of them.

Nevertheless, they all cried out the same thing as they saw me and ran. "The lich has returned! The Corpse is back! Run, everybody!"

I walked through the empty plains of the Goblin Grasslands and removed the skull mask.

"It's quiet," I said.

*"And so very, very lonely."*

"Shut up."

I pressed toward the kingdom through the winds that swept over the grasslands.

The next day, I wrapped a bandage around my red eye to hide it. I told the other servants I had hurt it while half-asleep. I couldn't tell if the gardeners were worried or angry. "How are you going to prune if you can't concentrate?" they said, but I was fairly certain they were concerned more than anything.

"It's okay. I can do it with my good eye," I said.

"Well, do what you can, but don't push it, okay?"

As promised, they let me prune the garden's trees. To begin, the old gardener stayed by my side, teaching me as we went. Eventually, we got through one tree.

"How's that?" I asked.

"You're getting there," he said. "Now, do the one over there just like this one. I have work of my own to get to."

"Uh...you mean, do it by myself...?"

"What's the problem? If you don't know what to do, you come find me, okay?"

"Yes, sir."

The old gardener was the type who preferred practical experience to explanations. There was nothing for me to do but get to it.

I took the pruning shears in hand and headed to the tree the old gardener had pointed to when I noticed Lady Roxy equipped in her white light armor. It looked as if she had just come back from the castle. Usually she went straight into the manor upon her return, but today was different. I was curious; where was she going?

I followed her and was about to raise my voice and call out...but felt suddenly unable to. Lady Roxy knelt before her father's grave, a heavy look upon her face like none I had ever seen her wear. It was the face of one about to go into battle. After saying something to the grave, Lady Roxy

stood, turned toward the manor...and found me watching her. I'd been staring so intently, I didn't even think to hide.

"Fay, what are you doing here...? Did something happen to your eye? Are you hurt?"

I put on an air of calm and showed Lady Roxy my gardening shears.

"I, uh...I was half-asleep, and I bumped it somehow. But starting today, I'm allowed to prune the garden's trees. So uh...I guess I'll prune this tree right here."

I put my hand on the tree next to me, even though it was actually entirely different from the one the gardener told me to work on.

"But...Lady Roxy," I said. "Is something wrong? You don't look like yourself today."

I asked the question with some apprehension. Had something happened at the castle? As I spoke, however, the expression I had seen at her father's grave vanished, and the Lady Roxy I knew returned.

"It's nothing," she said. "But if I were you, I'd worry a little more about pruning before someone scolds you."

Lady Roxy pointed at the glaring figure of the old gardener, his arms crossed. I knew exactly what that gaze said. *Not that tree, numbskull, the one over there!*

Lady Roxy used the opportunity to slip away toward the manor. I couldn't put my finger on it, but as I watched her walk away, I was left with an ominous feeling. It stood in contrast to the cloudless sky, which was clear and beautiful.

Once my duties were complete, I was free until my evening hunt, so I went to the local bar. When I got there, I heard the news I had been aching for. The barkeep told me as he brought my meal to the counter.

At long last, Hado Vlerick was heading to Hobgoblin Forest to hunt and kill the newly returned lich. And he was headed there tonight.

A holy knight just like Lady Roxy was coming to my hunting ground. My *turf*.

Hado had to have information. He had to know something about that odd shop in the Merchant District. If the Vlerick family had done something foul, I would pull it out of him. But this was also personal. I had a score to settle with Hado. A big one.

I downed the last of the wine in my glass and stood from my seat.

## Chapter 23: What Must Be Done

**T**HAT EVENING, I waited silently in the Hobgoblin Forest for the arrival of Hado Vlerick.

I was in the flower field the goblin king had once called its territory. It was a circular clearing surrounded by trees, the only place in the forest where trees no longer grew. In the center of the clearing were the remains of the withered tree that had fallen in my battle with the goblin king. It was there that I sat in wait, my senses sharpened.

Hado would come. He had to. I had left him a trail of goblin corpses to follow. If that wasn't enough for him to find me, then he really was so stupid he was beyond saving. The rest depended on how fully he believed the rumors about the Corpse's modus operandi.

The Corpse only attacked goblins. It did not attack people—yet. If Hado believed this, he wouldn't see the scattered goblin corpses as the trail to a trap. I listened closely and heard only the rustling of leaves in the wind. He had not come. I wondered if the barkeep's information was bad.

Just as I thought this, I picked up a different sound steadily approaching. Then, at the edge of the flower field, the noise stopped. I remained unmoving, seated on the fallen tree. Behind my mask, I continued to watch.

More movement. The sounds spread and separated, surrounding my location. They were getting into position, and then they would attack. Still, I didn't move. I would give them the first strike. What mattered most was ensuring Hado didn't get away. That meant luring him into thinking this was his best chance to strike, while the Corpse hadn't noticed his presence.

Most holy knights of Hado's level had proven themselves in Galia, hunting the ever growing population of powerful monsters that called the continent home. But Hado had still never been, and he was little more than shit stuck to the ass of his older brother, Rafale. In other words, even with his imposing figure, Hado was inexperienced and cowardly—the type of person who only picked battles he could win, and opponents he could dominate. Having been ground under his bootheel, I knew only too well.

And I knew Hado saw the Corpse as exactly the kind of easy job that would earn him merit in the kingdom while allowing him to avoid duties in Galia. As a holy knight, Hado wasn't interested in becoming stronger. He only wanted to use his position to earn higher status and greater influence. The Vlerick family was a rat's nest full of this kind of vermin.

*"Fate, they're coming!" said Greed.*

*"So it would seem."*

The enemy closed in. I heard them pulling bowstrings behind me, to the right. In my half-starved state, with my senses painfully keen, the sound was all too clear.

The bows fired, and I sprang into the air, evading both arrows with ease. My reaction was unexpected, and the men in hiding gasped. I had shaken their confidence. Landing back on my feet, I held Greed in a battle stance.

*"Ready?"* Greed asked.

*"Just a little longer."*

If I did nothing, they would come to me. Even though their bows were useless from a distance, they retained the confidence and safety of a group. I was one against many, and they would show themselves on the flower field to reach me. Hado loved to do his bullying en masse. It was his personality; he was powerless to resist himself.

As I expected, he stepped out from the trees in his silver heavy armor with a group of fourteen cronies. Quite the entourage. I guessed that they were all adventurers specially selected and hired by the Vlerick family. Unsheathing their swords from their belts, they approached me with wicked smiles upon their faces.

As Hado's forces unveiled their true number, I showed a hint of apprehension. That served to strengthen their resolve and convince them of their upper hand.

*"Great Lord Hado, it seems we've found ourselves the so-called Corpse...the lich of rumor. He looks just like all the reports claimed. And now that he's surrounded, he's petrified."*

*"Of course he is!"* Hado bellowed. *"We're nothing like those greedy little adventurers hunting goblins for chump change. We're the chosen ones, and I, a holy knight, have been anointed by the gods themselves. I'm the strongest here! There's no monster that wouldn't cower before my might. Behold, for the Corpse shivers in fear!"*

*"He does! Your righteous stare defeated him before the battle even began."*

Hado laughed. *"But of course."*

Would they ever stop talking? My performance had won them over. Hado and his men were utterly lost to their overconfidence. The Vlericks had tormented me over five long years, and this playacting was just what I had learned from that abuse. It was impossible to feel any sort of pride in it.

But my actions also gave Hado the courage to lead the pack and put himself in front. He wouldn't get away now.

First, I needed to rid myself of those fourteen rats he brought. I gripped the black sword Greed. Acting time was over.

One of Hado's underlings turned to his master.

*"Great Lord Hado, allow us the honor of this hunt,"* he said arrogantly. *"There's no need for you to dirty your hands with a monster of this level."*

*"Very well, so be it. Do as you please!"*

*"As you wish."*



It was time to see what Hado's forces could do. I unleashed the totality of my stats, and in a rush of wind appeared in front of the grunt who'd just spoken. With my left hand, I punched him in the face. Just a tap. Before he could even open his mouth, I sent him flying into the forest's depths. One down.

I ignored the astonishment on Hado's face and moved in to attack the remaining thirteen underlings. Every blow came from my left hand, and not a single man met Greed's blade. My business was with Hado, and I held no ill will toward these men. I would send them home with their lives.

However, I knew that minor injuries would lead Hado's group to return, so I used the Brawl skill's Ruinous Strike tech-art. I shattered one man's right arm, another's left leg, and the jaw of yet another. They were experienced warriors, but our sheer stat differential made them appear to move in slow motion. I could control them like toys even without any real hand-to-hand combat experience.

When my assault was over, Hado's men lay broken on the ground, gasping to recover. The expensive swords they had drawn just moments ago were scattered across the field like useless wastes of money.

That left only two people standing: Hado and myself.

It seemed Hado's mouth wouldn't shut properly. It kept opening and closing like that of an oxygen-starved fish. He stared at the grunts on the ground around him as I slowly approached.

"What are you doing?!" he shouted at them. "Get up and stop the beast! Do you intend to make me, a holy knight, take care of this myself?!"

His underlings struggled to their feet, obeying their barking leader's commands. However, a single swing of the black sword Greed—a little threat to let them know their heads would roll next—sent them all running, faces pale with fear. They disappeared into the depths of the forest, leaving Hado entirely on his own.

*Not so loyal to the Vlerick family in the end, I thought.*

"Cowards! Come back! Do you know who I am?! I'm the great Hado of the Vlericks!"

Not even a peep in response.

*Funny. They seemed so enthusiastic mere moments ago.*

They had by now run so far that Hado's voice would no longer reach them, no matter how much he shouted.

*How pitiful to be abandoned by your entourage, Hado. Let's call this an indication of your popularity.*

"You," Hado growled. "You just made a fool of me... Even a wretched monster will not be forgiven such transgression!"

Hado drew his golden sword and pointed its blade at me as he settled into a fighting stance. I had to admit, his spirit was admirable. However, his knees wobbled ever so slightly. Perhaps he was instinctively scared. Perhaps he was just a piece of trash. We would know soon enough, when our blades crossed.

It was just the two of us in the flower field. Nobody else remained. The time for disguises was over. I slowly removed my hooded robe and let it drop to the ground. Then I removed the skull mask which hid my identity. Hado's face twisted in disbelief at the sight of me unmasked.

"Impossible... Where did a good-for-nothing, low-level vermin like you get that kind of power...? Tell me!"





Stupefied by my unexpected appearance, Hado took a step back. In response, I stepped forward, closing the distance between us a touch.

"I don't need to answer your questions," I said, "but you'll answer all of mine."

"Huh...? What is this...arrogance?! And if I don't answer you?! What then?"

"If you answer me, your death will be painless," I said. "But if you don't, I will make you suffer until you do."

"Preposterous! Do you know who I am?! I'm the second son of the Vlerick family! I'm the holy knight, Hado. A rat like you can do nothing to me!"

"Then show me," I said. "Show me this holy knight power you're so proud of."

I swung the black sword Greed in circles as I confidently edged closer to Hado. I knew that, if I let him live, sooner or later he would be a thorn in Lady Roxy's side. Perhaps worse. So once I got what I wanted, I would kill him.

If Lady Roxy knew what I was going to do next, it would break her heart. But my mind was made up. I would reap what I sowed.

I would feast.

## Chapter 24: The Second Level

**I** SLOWLY BROUGHT the black sword to a battle-ready stance, the blade pointed at Hado. Then I used Identify.

**Hado Vlerick, Lv 30**

**Vitality: 165,600**

**Strength: 197,600**

**Magic: 124,400**

**Spirit: 130,900**

**Agility: 123,800**

**Skills: Holy Sword Technique, Strength Boost (High)**

Those were the stats of a holy knight, I would give him that. Strong enough to warrant his cheek, at least. But he was weaker than the crowned kobold, which I had killed and devoured. In other words, I didn't need to check my stats to know his power was nothing compared to mine.

However, I was curious about his skills. I already knew what Strength Boost did, but Holy Sword Technique intrigued. I analyzed it with Identify.

**Holy Sword Technique: Attack levels rise when a special-grade holy sword is equipped. Unlocks the area-of-effect tech-art Grand Cross.**

A holy skill was a hallmark of holy knights, the reason Hado could call himself one. Using Holy Sword Technique required a special weapon, a holy sword, all of which were forged in Seifort's Military District. Holy swords were guarded with the utmost care and kept in secrecy, with each blade made entirely to order. They were forged from a metallic alloy that included rare orichalcum ore. At least, that's what I had heard at the local bar. Just how true it was, I didn't know.

What I did know was that holy swords were invaluable, and it was nearly impossible for a commoner like myself to lay hands on one. At the sight of Hado's legendary blade, I felt a flicker of concern; how would the black sword Greed, which I had bought for two silver coins, fare against such a vaunted weapon?

"Greed," I said. "I heard holy swords are pretty dangerous."

*"I will not fall to any man-made blade," he spat in return. "Don't think twice, just fight to your heart's content!"*

I'd hurt Greed's pride. He wanted me to know he was better than Hado's holy sword in every way. If he felt so strongly, I would gladly put him to the test.

Hado and I faced off at the ready until I broke the tension. I shifted into a middle guard and launched at him.

He had been waiting for that and grinned. "You're a fool to charge in a straight line. Have you no sense of tactics? This is why you peasants make me sick. You're all so stupid."

Hado waited like an idiot as I lost my patience and rushed him. His sword began to emit a pale light, and along with it, the ground beneath my feet glowed, too.

"Behold, the hidden holy-sword tech-art, Grand Cross. In its purifying light, not even dust will remain. Ha ha ha!"

The power of the tech-art rose around me. If it hit me straight on, the damage would be considerable. But the attack was far too slow. In my present state, I could have yawned in boredom in the time it took Hado to actually unleash the technique.

But there was no need to take Hado's attack head-on, so I kicked the ground at full strength. The kick sent me hurtling out of the target zone for the Grand Cross attack, and I landed directly in front of Hado. "A bit laggardly with your precious holy technique, aren't you? You should really work on that."

"What?!"

Hado spent all his time safe and snug behind the kingdom's walls; he barely had a shred of combat experience to his name. In fact, his experience was perhaps not too different from my own. Then again, this was a guy who decided to kickstart our fight by whipping out his strongest attack. He might know even less than I did.

Hado's plan had fallen to pieces. He canceled his Grand Cross attack as he scrambled to recover and brought his sword down at me in an attempt to create distance between us. The time was now—the time to see if Greed really was the stronger blade. I swung the black sword in a horizontal cut to knock Hado's holy sword off its intended course.

The high-pitched ring of colliding metal echoed through the forest.

"Impossible... My holy sword... It's..."

Part of Hado's neatly-halved holy sword flew through the air. The sword he took so much pride in was lost, and so too was Hado. I caught the broken blade in my free hand.

"Here's your precious sword back," I said, plunging the blade into his right shoulder, through the gap between his heavy armor plates.

The scream that met my ears could have woken every sleeping hobgoblin in the forest. Hado fell to his knees from the pain, trying frantically to wrest the broken blade from his shoulder.

*Oh, but we're just beginning, Hado. It's much too early to be on your knees.*

"You are a disgrace to the name of the holy knights," I said. "Stand up!"

But Hado had lost the will to fight. I moved Greed to my left hand and gripped Hado's throat with my right, lifting him up. He struggled, trying to break free, but it was all for nothing.

"Now it's time for you to taste some of that 'education' you and your siblings love to dish out," I said. "They say bad dogs just need to be broken, you know."

Hado only squealed.

For five long years, I had endured the Vlerick school of discipline. I had marinated in it. I had learned how to make someone surrender, to submit, and to yield. Now I would return the favor.

"Are you ready, Hado?"

"No, you can't be... Stop, please! Stop!"

Gripping Hado by the throat, I held his body in front of me as I charged into the forest at full power, straight into the great trees and anything else that stood in my way. I didn't care. I had a great holy knight as a shield. Hado's body rammed through a river of trees, and he sent them crashing to the ground. With each tree broken, Hado broke, too. His once lustrous hair tore, and his face became a tapestry of open wounds.

When we finally arrived back at the flower field, Hado's face was hideously swollen. Hobgoblins were more handsome.

"Please...I beg of you...stop..."

*Ha. To hear those words from the likes of you. All this time, when the people you treated as insects begged you to stop...you never did. Not you, nor your brother or sister. You, Hado, who bought children from kidnappers and toyed with them until they died... You pushed me to the brink of death. And now that our positions are reversed, you beg for me to stop?!*

I gave in to anger and threw Hado high into the night sky. I waited for his moaning voice to grow distant, then turned Greed into the black bow.

"Greed, I want three shots of the Bloody Ptarmigan, and I'll give you thirty percent of my stats."

*Greed laughed. "A feast. How generous of you. But you don't want to kill him just yet, do you?"*

"I want the shots to graze him. Not kill. Can you do it?"

*"With ease. Now, let me eat. Give me that thirty percent!"*

As Greed slurped away my stats, the bow grew, assuming that sinister arch before my eyes. This hulking weapon would be the judge of Hado's sins. I launched three arrows into the air as Hado began his freefall descent. Three bolts of black lightning ripped through the sky with a deafening shriek. They pierced the night as they shot past Hado's form, grazing him.

Moments later, a body collided into the center of the flower field with a heavy, wet thud. Hado's right leg and both his arms had been torn off, but he yet lived. Thanks to his high vitality levels, his wounds had even stopped bleeding.

Enough. Any more, and the holy knight would die before he gave me what I needed. I changed strategies.

"Tell me where your siblings are."

Filled with fear, clinging to the hope that I might let him live, Hado gave me my first answer.

Rafale and Memil were in a mountain kingdom to the far east, and they wouldn't be back for another three months. I was disappointed, but



there were other, more important matters. I needed to know about Lady Roxy. Something had been wrong when she returned to the manor from the castle. Hado, her fellow holy knight, was going to tell me why.

I was dumbstruck by his response—so much so that I wanted to crush Hado's jaw with my fist. But I asked him again, to be sure.

"It's true..." he said. "She leaves for Galia tomorrow."

"Why was she sent so suddenly?"

"The Divine Dragon is...looking to expand its territory. It's closing in on Galia's borders. This hasn't happened in...a thousand years. None of the holy knights want to go. Nobody wants to die holding back waves of monsters in Galia, not when there's an unstoppable dragon there. But... somebody has to slow them...stop those beasts from reaching the kingdom."

So the task fell to Lady Roxy. That was why the holy knights had gathered on the night I saw them in the Merchant District. All the holy knights except for the Hart family had met, and all of them were in agreement.

Rafale had initially targeted Lady Roxy because she defended me. However, the death of her father, Lord Mason, also played a role in their decision. Lord Mason had held great power among the holy knights, and his orders to the others were always for the good of the people. However, that led the other knights to nurse a slowly building grudge against him and his way of life. Now that he was dead, it sought a new target.

The Divine Dragon was too good an opportunity to pass up. By sending Lady Roxy into Galia's extreme dangers, the holy knights could eliminate the Hart family. This was the plan Rafale and the kingdom's other holy knights had devised.

"And Lady Roxy agreed to it?" I asked.

"She couldn't refuse... It was a unanimous decision by the kingdom's holy knights...all of them."

It had already been decided by the time Lady Roxy was called to the castle on the day we returned. The kingdom's holy knights, all her enemies, had ordered her to Galia to die. My heart ached to think of the look on Lady Roxy's face when she returned to the manor and stood before her father's grave. Then Hado told me what Lady Roxy said when she had received her orders.

"She said...if giving her life meant saving that of even a single citizen, then she gave it gladly."

It was just like Lady Roxy to say that, even with her back against the wall. That was who she was; I knew it even from the short time I had spent as her servant. But if the holy knights had made this decision, it wasn't something I could change.

"I've told you everything you asked," Hado gasped, staring at the sky. "Please... I'll do anything, just...spare me my life..."

He was hollow. So very hollow and insincere. There was no remorse in his heart, only the words with which he begged for his life. A life I ended with the swing of the black sword Greed.

***Gluttony skill activated. Stats increased: Vitality +165,600, Strength +197,600, Magic +124,400, Spirit +130,900, Agility +123,800. Skills added: Holy Sword Technique, Strength Boost (High)***

His soul was unexpectedly delicious, similar to the crowned kobold's. Though I thought I had overcome it, Gluttony once again sent me into delirium with ecstasy. I wiped the drool from my mouth with my sleeve and gazed at the body of Hado as it grew cold. It made me feel as though a part of me had grown colder, too.

Greed called out to me through Telepathy, cutting through the chill. *"You can unlock the Second Level now. So how about it? Want to do it?"*

*"Do it."*

*"Why so kind and generous all of a sudden?"*

*"It gives me chills to think I have Hado's stats coursing through my veins."*

Greed's laughter echoed through me. There was nothing I could do about the skills I had taken from this vile man, but his stats, at least, I could flush from myself.

*"Well, here we go!"*

As the black sword began to glow, power drained from me, until...

*"Huh... A scythe."*

I held in my hands a black scythe, the blade of which was at least as long as I was tall.

*"This is my Second Level form: the black scythe. Its cursed blade will cut through anything and everything, right through to its very essence."*

I studied the sharp black blade as I used Identify to check my current stats.

***Fate Graphite, Lv 1***

***Vitality: 121***

***Strength: 151***

***Magic: 101***

***Spirit: 101***

***Agility: 131***

***Skills: Gluttony, Identify, Telepathy, Conceal, Night Vision, One-Handed Sword Technique, Two-Handed Sword Technique, Brawl, Holy Sword Technique, Strength Boost (Low), Strength Boost (Medium), Strength Boost (High), Vitality Boost (Low), Vitality Boost (Medium), Agility Boost (Medium), Health Regen***

My stats were right back to where they started when Greed and I first met.

Holy Sword Technique... I guess, depending on how you looked at it, I had joined the ranks of the holy knights. But, of course, the kingdom would never acknowledge it.

## Chapter 25: Departures

**B**Y CONSUMING HADO'S SOUL, I had eased the pressure of Gluttony's starvation. My red eye returned to black like a receding tide. Knowing I didn't need to hide it with bandages was a relief. I wouldn't have to worry about explaining it away every time I met someone, either.

With Hado Vlerick dead, I had checked one task off the list. Two still remained, but there was nothing I could do while they were away from the kingdom.

The problem now was not the Vlericks, but Lady Roxy. She departed for Galia tomorrow. It was likely only a very small number of servants at the manor had been informed. I expected the head servant probably knew. But Lady Roxy had not told me, and resentment built somewhere deep within me.

Then again, as far as Lady Roxy knew, I was powerless, and there would have been no reason to tell me about this. It was more like her to keep her troubles to herself so as not to worry others.

I spent some time rebuilding my lost stats by hunting hobgoblins. Then, as I walked the night paths back to the kingdom, Greed spoke.

*"Here's a story: Guy spends his time hiding who he is, but in the end, still wants the girl to rely on him... Bit self-absorbed, if you ask me."*

"Shut up."

*"It's time to give that up. This is your fate."*

"I said, shut up!"

My shout drew confused looks from passing drunkards, who turned toward me. I ignored their bleary stares and hurried on my way.

No lights were on in the manor. It was silent as the grave as I slipped in through the window of my room on the first floor. I placed Greed by the bed, slipped under the covers, and closed my eyes. But it was strange. Even after the battle with Hado, I wasn't the least bit tired. My swirling thoughts refused to grant me slumber, and I spent the entire night lost in worries about Lady Roxy. I greeted the morning having not slept a wink.

*"Let me tell you something worthwhile, Fate," said Greed. "First-rate adventurers take rest wherever they can get it. You getting your heart all in a bother like this? That makes you less than third rate."*

I remained silent.

*"And now you're sulking? How pitiful to think that you wield the great sword, Greed."*

"Shut up."

*Greed laughed. "Still have some life in you yet, huh? In that case, let me tell you something else. There's a real commotion outside your room. Might want to check it out."*

I was so lost in thought that I hadn't noticed what was going on outside of my own room. Now I picked up on several pairs of feet rushing in the corridor. Servants were taught not to run through the halls. There was only one reason I could think of that would have this many people so restless.

The other servants had at last been informed. I hurried out of bed and left my room. Desolate faces passed me by, and I joined them as we headed to the manor's entrance. We found Lady Roxy there, surrounded by other servants. As I neared, she noticed me.

"Good morning, Fate," she said.

"What is this? What's going on...?"

She was leaving for Galia. I knew it, but I had to ask.

"A summons arrived this morning from the castle. I'm being sent to the Galian post. It's a great honor."

It was a lie. It had been decided long ago. But she'd kept it hidden until this morning, until the very last moment, all to make sure nobody had a chance to rebel. Not the servants, and not the townspeople who loved the Hart family. That was the extent to which the people of the kingdom adored the Harts. The one who knew this best was the head of that family: Lady Roxy herself.

I pushed down my desire to say what I truly felt and spoke. "Galia's too dangerous right now. And your father, he..."

"I understand the situation, Fate. The task my father was unable to accomplish—his duty—it falls to me now."

"But how long will you be there?"

"Until we have the monsters under control. Judging from past expeditions, I'd expect around three years."

Lady Roxy would never last that long. Not when the Divine Dragon had broken its thousand-year silence and ventured as far as the country's borders. Since Lord Mason's death, if Hado's words were to be believed, the dragon had been spotted multiple times crossing the border. The situation there was more dangerous than could be imagined. Lady Roxy's target was heavenly calamity itself. Such a monster wouldn't let you run if it found you. You would die like nothing more than an insect, holy knight or otherwise.

"Please, Fate, don't look like that. I'll be fine. While I'm gone, you have permission to work at the family estate. As long as you're there, the Vlericks won't be able to reach you."

"I..."

"What is it, Fate? What's wrong?"

*Take me with you.*

I couldn't say it. I was a monster of Gluttony. I devoured the souls of those I killed and took their power as my own... I existed outside the rules the gods had created. In this world, I was an ungodly outsider. One of the forsaken.

If my powers were known, I would be rejected. Exiled. When I thought of that, I couldn't find the words to speak. Lady Roxy left me and headed for the manor's entrance.

I had no power to stop her. As a servant of the manor, I could only do as the others did and see my master off on her journey.

It was then that I saw the pendant, a blue stone at Lady Roxy's chest—the present I had given her when we visited the Merchant District together. She had turned it into a necklace, which she now wore.

Lady Roxy noticed me staring at the blue stone, and her face grew shy. "This memory is very precious to me, so I'll take the stone with me always. What do you think?"

"It...looks wonderful on you."

She appeared satisfied with my words, and she replied with her own, though they couldn't possibly come true. "We'll meet again, Fate."

"Good...good luck, Lady Roxy."

Standing before her servants, Lady Roxy gave a final farewell and left the manor. We stood there together, seeing her off as she grew smaller down the road and drew further away. From here, she would head to the Military District, where she would lead the army waiting for her toward Galia.

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I cut through the crowd of crying servants and headed back to my room, where Greed rested on the bed. I started preparing at once, though admittedly, there wasn't much to do. I owned only a few sets of clothes, the black sword Greed, and my skull mask. I was ready to go in mere moments, and I took Greed in hand.

*"So you've decided," he said.*

"Yes," I said. "I'm going to Galia. Not as a servant...but as just another adventurer."

*"I see."*

As I left my room, the head servant arrived. She carried a document of some sort.

"Fate, take this," she said. "It's a letter of recommendation from Lady Roxy for work at the Hart family estate."

Just as she had promised me earlier. But I didn't need it anymore.

"I'm sorry, but I can't accept it. I'm going to become an adventurer."

I pointed at Greed, hanging from my belt.

"But...you're not strong enough. You'll never make it in that life. You can't talk like that. Please, take this."

When I stubbornly refused her request to take the letter, the head servant sighed in resignation. She took five gold pieces from her pocket, which she passed to me.

"I can't force you to stay, so I guess this is it. Here, these are your wages as of today, along with your severance pay. Use them wisely."

"I earned this much...? Thank you for everything. Including for looking after me while I was here. I'll put this money to good use."

The money was actually a huge help, because I didn't have much. With this, I could pay my way to join a caravan instead of walking. I gave the head servant my final thanks and left my room.

Next, I went to the head gardener and told him of my decision. I knew he was training me to be his successor, and he was both angry and disappointed. "Stupid kids these days!" he muttered. As I left, though, he turned to me and said, "If you change your mind, you come on back. We'll be waiting." It was a kindness I wouldn't forget.

Finally, I stood before Hart Manor. I bowed deeply to the structure itself to show my thanks and walked away. I stopped by the Merchant District to buy provisions, which I stuffed into my bag. For someone with an appetite like mine, food was essential.

After that, there was one last place I needed to go. If I didn't, I knew that guy would end up putting another flower on the counter, thinking I was dead.

It was still early, so the bar was preparing for the lunch rush. Just as I thought I'd picked a bad time, the barkeep poked his head out from inside.

"What are you doing here so early? We still haven't opened."

"Well, actually, I came to say goodbye."

The barkeep was speechless, and he disappeared back inside. After a time, he reappeared with a bottle of wine in hand.

"Here," he said. "It's a parting gift—a bottle of the cheap crap you always drank. It's your favorite, right?"

I couldn't help but laugh. I never drank it because I loved it. The barkeep knew that too, and the gift was his idea of a joke.

"You're always welcome here, friend. And by the way," he said, pushing the wine at me, "this is actually the high-quality stuff."

"Thank you so much."

I took the wine and found a little space to stuff it into my bag, which was so full it was nearly bursting now. I said a final farewell to the barkeep, and I left the bar, too.

Finally, I arrived at the Merchant District gate. From there, I would take a caravan headed south, toward Galia. But while I stood there, I felt something like nostalgia as I watched the endless back-and-forth of caravans, and adventurer parties heading out to hunt goblins. It felt like so long ago that I had come here with Greed to venture out on my first hunt.

I paid for passage on a caravan, and I glanced at the castle in the center of the kingdom. It was there that everything had started, first with gatekeeping and then with the bandit I slew. Now I was leaving to fight the monsters that roamed Galia. What would the old gatekeeper version of myself have thought, seeing me now? He'd probably think I was a lunatic.

"Excuse me, sir! The caravan will leave shortly!"

I hopped onto a wagon as it headed out and away from the Kingdom of Seifort. I had experienced great pain and suffering within the kingdom's walls, but also memories to treasure. It was my home, and one day, I would be back.

But for now, it was farewell.



## Side Story: Of Roxy and Fate

**U**PON LEAVING FATE and the servants at Hart Manor, I proceeded to the kingdom's Military District. By the time I knew about my expedition to Galia, the holy knights had already made the decision, and it was unanimous. I thought it likely the Vlericks were pulling the strings behind the scenes.

However, I did not bear any ill will toward the Vlerick family. My father, Mason Hart, had been unable to fulfill his duty, that of holding back the encroaching monsters at the kingdom's borders. This decision was the outcome of his death in battle; it was only natural that his daughter be made to carry out his task.

A holy knight exists to fight for the people, and for the kingdom, and it is for that reason they are given such high status. At least, that was how it had been a long time ago. Now, the holy knights had lost their honor, and they put rank and status above all else. Now, the holy knights cared only about self-preservation, even when it came at the cost of the people they existed to protect.

Even the five esteemed families had succumbed to this poisonous agenda. Rumors had spread that the Vlericks desired to take charge of Seifort and had enlisted the help of two other families. That left only the Hart and Barbatos families to stand against them. However, the Barbatos family head, Lord Aaron—the holy knight known as the Blade of Light—had gone into hiding for reasons unknown. All that remained of the Barbatos family now was their name and our shared pursuit of an ideal world.

I had never met Lord Aaron myself, but I remembered the tales of his greatness my father told to me. Were the Barbatos family head to return, perhaps it would bring a new wind into the kingdom, one that would blow away the ugly air that the holy knights now possessed.

However, it was best not to hope for that which could not come true.

All that was left was for me to do my utmost. To do anything less, to fall to weakness, would make me less than the Roxy Hart that Fate wanted me to be. There was no way he could have remembered the moment we met five years ago, on the night I had accompanied my father all the way from our estate to the kingdom.

At the time, I had not yet wanted to become a holy knight.

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I yawned. I was tired, and I was not yet used to parties. My father regarded me, and though his face was troubled, he spoke to me with kindness.

"What's wrong, Roxy?"

"No, it's nothing, father."

I tried to play it off, but my father saw through me. I felt another yawn coming but held it down. I had to remember my manners. The surrounding holy knights would not otherwise acknowledge me as the next leader of the family.

We had come to the kingdom when I turned twelve. Now, here, I was making the rounds of the holy knight families, greeting them as the successor to the Hart family. I was introduced *ad nauseum*, and I engaged in meaningless conversation with more than twenty people. For the most part, I maintained a stiff smile while my father did the majority of the talking.

At this point, I had rarely left the family estate. It was my first time in a place with so many holy knights, and I felt something different about them. Something different from the Hart family. They surveyed me as though I were an object to be valued. They were weighing what role I would play in the future.

There was not a single person to talk to with whom I could relax, and speaking to Rafale and Hado of the Vlerick family was the absolute worst. It seemed to me that the future of the kingdom was a bleak one if a house like theirs was one of the five esteemed families.

When the social niceties were over, I was exhausted. My mother had gone to so much trouble to prepare the white dress I wore, and yet...I wished it could have been for something different.

My father must have noticed, for he leaned over and spoke to me. "Roxy, I think you've done all you need to this evening. Why don't you head back to the manor a little early?"

"I... Yes. I think I'll do that, father. Excuse me..."

My answer was curt, and I escaped the room, lively as it was with holy knights. A great weight fell from my shoulders the moment I passed through the door. I was still unaccustomed to such gatherings. To think these events would be my life for the foreseeable future...

I informed a castle servant that I was leaving, and they brought me to a room to change. In that spacious chamber, I donned the clothes I had arrived in. They were not particularly good clothes. Even if you were being kind, you might say they were only a little nicer than what the townspeople usually wore. But it was for that reason that I loved them. They had been lovingly prepared for me by the villagers of the Hart family estate for my journey to the kingdom.

I felt at ease shucking my elaborate white dress and donning this simpler fare. It was like returning to the estate where I was born, and to the sweet scent of grapes.

"Well," I said to myself, "time to head home."

As I left the room, I shook my head at the guards who approached, whose job it was to protect me on my way back to the manor. Even as a young girl, I still possessed the skills of a holy knight. Despite my low level,

I was strong enough to take on any roaming evildoers. Besides, I wanted to walk home on my own to clear my head.

I exited the castle and looked up at the sky.

"My, my, it's that time already..."

The moon had climbed high into the night. I had been at that party for more than four hours, stuck in that boring hall, wandering around as I introduced myself.

I left by the main gate, enjoying the cool, brisk air as I headed to the Holy Knight District. It was then that I noticed a boy walking along a side street by the gate, staring up at the moon. He was about my age, but what was he doing? Where were his parents? Feeling concerned, I called out.

"Excuse me, it's dangerous to walk around here at this time of night. You'd best hurry home, or your family will worry."

But the boy merely shook his head with a wry chuckle. "I only just arrived in the kingdom today. I don't have a home to go back to, and my family are... Well, they're gone..."

I was speechless in the face of such a tragic truth. An orphan. Perhaps he was whiling the night away, staring at the moon with nowhere else to go. Yet here I was, poking my nose into matters that weren't my business. My face went red with embarrassment. I was glad to see the clouds cover the moon, the streets falling into mild darkness. I had been the one who spoke first, yet here I was, stuck not knowing what to say next.

"No need to worry about me," the boy said. "But you should probably get home soon. I thought with this place being so full of holy knights, it would be safe, but it doesn't seem so. Just a moment ago, some weird guy chased me away. I didn't even do anything! By the time I stopped to catch my breath, I was here in front of the castle."

The boy scratched his head sheepishly. It was mortifying for me to hear that the kingdom was full of holy knights and still unsafe. Yet the boy was worried about *me*. Given my dress, he likely assumed I was just another townspeople. He would never in a million years have guessed that I possessed holy skills and would one day be a holy knight myself.

Even then, I felt a little annoyed. "I might look like this," I said, "but I'm pretty strong, you know!"

"Oh, is that so?"

"You don't believe me, do you?"

"No, no, I believe you just fine."

"I can tell by the tone of your voice that you think I'm lying!"

The boy shook his head of scruffy hair and began to leave, as if there was nothing else left to say. His attitude and the way he held himself were cold, and yet in his tone, I sensed...something. It was the first time I'd met someone like this, and I was intrigued.

I called out for him to stop, and when I did, his stomach grumbled. I had never heard such a sound before. It was so unexpected it made me laugh.

"It's so loud!" I exclaimed.

"Don't laugh, I can't help it. Everyone gets hungry sometimes."

The boy told me he didn't have any money, so he couldn't afford food. This gave me an idea—a way to stop him from leaving.

"If you accompany me, I'll feed you. How does that sound?"

"What? Really?"

The simple offer brought him to my side with such excitement that the very color of his eyes seemed to change. To think he'd been trying to avoid me. I supposed boys of his age were simple at heart.

But where to get that food...? I didn't know any places where local townspeople ate. I thought for a time, then I asked the boy to wait as I headed back toward the castle. I explained the situation to the guard at the gate, and asked if he wouldn't mind requesting some light snacks for me from the servants inside. The guard looked a little troubled by my request, but he knew I was the daughter of the Hart family, so he dashed into the castle. It made me worry that perhaps I was no different from the other holy knights, using my position and rank to make people do my bidding.

I was so lost in these depressing thoughts that I didn't notice when the guard returned with a servant, who carried a basket.

"I'm sorry it took so long."

"No," I said. "You were quite quick."

"As you know, all the holy knights are attending a party tonight, so...I prepared a selection of the food we intended to serve. It's sandwiches."

The servant opened the basket to reveal fresh vegetables and hard-boiled egg between soft slices of bread. "Are they to your liking, miss?"

"They look delicious. Thank you so much!"

"It was nothing, miss! Please excuse me, I must be getting back."

With an astonished look on her face, the servant bowed deeply and ran back into the castle. I had only given her a simple thanks, but it seemed my reaction was unusual. Had it really become so rare for holy knights to express gratitude...?

It wasn't time to think about such things. Basket in hand, I hurried back to where the boy waited. I wasn't sure he would still be there, but he was. I walked up to him and his scruffy hair and showed him my prize.

"Here you go. Please help yourself," I said.

When the boy saw the sandwiches, his expression lit up. "Are you sure? I can eat all of these?"

"Of course you can. Every last one."

I passed a sandwich to the boy, and nervously, gingerly, he brought it to his lips. Then he practically inhaled it. Just as his rumbling stomach had hinted, he was ravenous.

Watching him eat so enthusiastically made me realize I was actually quite hungry myself. I'd been so busy at the party talking with the holy knights that I hadn't been able to eat. It seemed that by talking to this boy, I was falling back into my human rhythms.

The boy devoured sandwich after sandwich. I was flabbergasted until he spoke.

"So do you work at the castle as, like, a maid or something?"

"Ah... Yes, that's correct. I'm a maid."

In answer to his question, I lied. I knew he would shy away if he knew I was the child of a holy knight, let alone one of the five esteemed families. So with apologies in my heart, I became a castle maid.

"We were so busy with preparations for tonight's party for the holy knights," I said. "These sandwiches are leftovers."

"Ah, so that's it. Holy knights get to eat delicious stuff like this all the time? Wow. Those guys get all the luck."

"I'm sorry..." The words seeped from me as barely more than a whisper.

The boy tilted his head. "What are you apologizing for?"

"Yes... What *am* I apologizing for?"

The boy laughed. "You're weird."

"I am a bit, aren't I?"

"You definitely are. A castle maid has no reason to apologize to me!"

For a time, we sat there talking and laughing, and before I knew it the cloudy feelings I'd carried with me the entire evening had all but vanished. It was so strange...I felt so at ease talking with this boy. Hoping to understand why, I studied his face, hidden by the shadows of night.

"Hey," he said. "Don't stare at me like that."

"Oh. I'm sorry."

The boy looked away, embarrassed. Something about that struck me as cute. I wanted to look more, but I knew he would leave if I did. I needed to change the subject.

"What do you think of the holy knights?" I asked. "I mean, what are they like from your point of view?"

"Why are you asking that all of a sudden?"

"I don't know. Just tell me, okay?"

The boy rubbed the back of his head. "All right, all right. I mean, you did give me these sandwiches, after all. But why're you asking me a question like that?"

"Because I work at the castle. I want to know what people from outside the castle think about the holy knights. I'm just curious."

"Oh, okay."

The boy told me then, in two simple words, exactly what he thought. And though they were just two words, they froze me to the core.

"They're terrifying."

Of course, it was obvious. There was a titanic divide between the stats of regular citizens and the holy knights with their powerful skills. Were an ordinary person to incur the wrath of a holy knight, their life could be erased in a blink. Moreover, the rank of holy knights entitled them to do so.

Worst of all, the holy knights were egotistical. Their way of thinking, their way of life, extended only as far as their own position. This worsened the peoples' fear and uncertainty. This boy, immature as he was, understood as much through every mote of his being.

I felt guilt and remorse to be one of those who frightened him so... those who possessed holy skills. Even my father and his strength couldn't fix what the kingdom's holy knights had become. Perhaps they would never change.

"Hey, don't look so sad," the boy said. "Seifort...the kingdom, it's not all bad. Not while there are people like you helping people like me when we're hungry."

At that moment, the moon peeked out through the clouds, and the boy's face came into focus. It was an innocent face, with just a hint of despair. It looked a little confused, and then a little sheepish, as the boy continued. "I wish more of the holy knights were like you."

His words gripped my heart with such strength that I forgot even to reply.

It was infinitely more straightforward than I had thought, and it was just as the boy had said. The problem was not the state of the holy knights around me. No. What was important was how I chose to hold myself as a holy knight. My way forward was one I would forge, and it would take the shape of what I believed in. Even my smallest gesture could bring joy to a person's face, like I had for this boy.

"Thank you," I said. "Because of you, I think I understand now."

"Uh, okay. I don't really know what I did, but I'm glad you feel better... Well, I better get going. If I stay here too much longer, I'm going to run into a bunch of holy knights..."

To have such a reason for leaving... The boy had run from trouble and wound up here. When he looked at the castle, he thought of the terrifying holy knights within. His stomach was satisfied now, but staying here made him anxious. It was possible the only reason he had remained as long as he had was because I had looked so depressed. It seemed, despite all he had suffered, he was kind.

As the boy made to leave a second time, I asked him one last thing. "Please, tell me your name."

The boy turned back and waved his hand. "I'm Fate Graphite! Thanks for the sandwiches. So long!"

In moments, he vanished into the kingdom's streets. Fate... I hoped we would meet again. Then I realized I had forgotten something important. He'd told me his name, but I failed to tell him my own!

"Oh, no..."

When we met again, would he remember me? We couldn't see each other in much detail in the darkness of the night, but...perhaps he would. I held this small hope in my heart as I looked up at the night sky. The stars shone brightly in the weave of evening. We had only spoken for a short

time, but I hoped Fate and I might speak again one day, under the clear night sky. On that day, I wanted to be able to tell him, with pride in my heart, that I was a holy knight. I would not put the confidence he entrusted with me to waste.

I knew that, for starters, I would need to lose my fake smiles and hold myself with more dignity. I started practicing how to stand straight and with pride.

"Roxy? Is that you? I thought you'd already gone back to the manor... Is something wrong?"

"Father?!"

My father frowned at me, a puzzled expression etched upon his features. The holy knights' party had ended.

*Oh no! He caught me in the middle of practice!* It was embarrassing to be seen with my chest puffed up as I tried out my holy knight swagger. I cleared my throat and decided to pretend it never happened. "Are you on your way home already, father?"

Father laughed. "I am. I was worried about you. It's your first time in the kingdom and I wanted to make sure you weren't lonely."

"I'm not a child anymore, father."

"To your parents, you will always be a child, Roxy," my father said, smiling as he sat on a bench by the castle wall. "Did something happen?"

That was just like my father. Even though he couldn't see my expression in the darkness, he read my tone of voice. With a resigned sigh, I told him a little of what had happened earlier.

"Ah, I see..."

My father said nothing else. He simply stared up at the night sky along with me. I was certain he was waiting for me to speak again.

I was no longer the confused girl I had been. I was the successor of house Hart, next in line as the head of the family. I had made up my mind.

"I want to be a holy knight like you, father. A holy knight who can share happiness and joy with the people I serve!"

My father stood, pleased to hear my commitment. He patted my head gently. "Your words make me proud! They are what make you a member of the Hart family. But you'll have to work harder from now on, starting tomorrow."

"Yes, father," I replied with my back straight and chest out.

Everything started now, and all of it was so that, the next time I met Fate, I could be proud to tell him I was Roxy Hart, the holy knight.

\*\*\*

A few years later I became a holy knight, but I still hadn't reunited with Fate. The days passed, and though Fate had roused the courage I needed to become what I was, my memory of him was fading with time, little by little.

At that point, I was put on gatekeeping duty at the castle. It was a responsibility expected of all holy knights. However, we were also allowed

to avoid it by hiring replacements, so many holy knights did, eschewing the work and leaving day laborers to take their place.

I believed it was only proper for a holy knight to carry out their expected duties themselves. Thus, I gladly adhered to the gatekeeping schedule. It was on my very first day of duty that I met him again. Fate.

I knew it was him before even asking his name. There was no mistaking his black hair and eyes. My heart beat nervously as I approached him.

"Hello there. I'm Roxy Hart. I'm here to relieve you of your duties. I'll take it from here."

"Uh...understood, sir! Ma'am!"

Fate didn't recognize me at all as he replied and bowed. He passed me the gatekeeper's spear, adorned with the royal family's coat of arms embroidered on its flag. It took everything I had not to let my disappointment show on my face.

I took the spear from Fate's hands, dejected, as he bounded away as quickly as he could, his face red. It seemed holy knights still terrified him. I was...saddened. In spite of that, however, I found reasons to talk with him, and once again he came to tell me a little about himself.

Fate's masters were the Vlerick family. I didn't want to believe it... that he was a day laborer for the most notorious of the five esteemed families. In truth, I had wanted for him to become a member of the Hart family staff, but it wasn't so easy to move against the Vlericks. They were esteemed, and if I did anything selfishly, it could cause my father trouble. I couldn't act for purely personal reasons.

As I brooded over what to do, the days and months went by. As they did, Fate suffered the violence of the Vlerick family's three siblings. Even though I stopped it when I saw it, I couldn't prevent everything.

Five years after I first met Fate, the news arrived at Hart Manor. My father had died in the line of duty, fighting monsters in Galia. Furthermore, he had perished by the hand of the Divine Dragon, which until that time had only called the center of Galia its home, and had never traveled as far as the kingdom's border.

My father's troops had been posted there, fighting the increasing waves of monsters to keep them from encroaching on our borders. Reports said the Divine Dragon had appeared in the sky, and with a single attack, it had wiped out my father, his troops, and even the monsters they had been fighting.

There was little else you could call it but bad luck. All the same, it was...just too much for me. I locked myself in my room in the manor. I was overwhelmed with grief, and at a loss as to what I should do. At that time, his face came to mind: Fate. The boy who always seemed to keep moving forward, no matter the circumstances.

*I want to see him again,* I thought, and in that thought, I once again found the courage to take my own steps forward.



I happened to be scheduled for guard duty that day, and that meant Fate would be on duty before I started. I could see him at our shift change. I donned my armor and hurried out of the manor. When I arrived at the castle gates, however, I met the sight of Rafale and his siblings once again beating Fate.

Blood rushed to my head, and I almost unsheathed my sword. However, such rash actions would be unforgivable for the head of the Hart family. I held down my rage, raising my voice as I moved in to stop Rafale. As a result, I succeeded in sending the Vlericks away, but what would happen next, I didn't know.

With my father gone, I had inherited the title of head of the Hart family. Thus, I could begin to push against certain boundaries in my way. With that in mind, I let Fate know I hoped to hire him, but I was so nervous it didn't go as I had hoped. In the end, Fate just ran away from me. Again. I felt so stupid. I had the perfect chance to talk to him and put it entirely to waste.

With my gatekeeper's spear in hand, I stared up at the sky. Two hours, three hours, five hours passed, and the sky transformed the world to night. Even then, I still thought of Fate. As I did, I heard his voice. At first, I thought it was my imagination, but I soon realized it was the boy himself.

There was a frantic expression on Fate's face. He said he'd seen what looked like bandits. I ran to where he had seen the break-in. There, I discovered a group of people had indeed trespassed, and all of them were armed. They moved in to attack me.

As a holy knight, these bandits were no match for me. However, they fought as a group, and one of them escaped with a light wound. I chased him down only to find Fate had finished him off. He stood shaking next to the dead body. It must have been his first time killing another person.

I ran over and took his hand, realizing he was shaking much more than I thought. He was not the sort of person suited to this kind of brutality, and I regretted leaving him to protect the gate while I was gone.

I could not let this go on any longer. This time, I would bring him to my side. I gathered my wits, and I made him an offer. However, in truth, it was only half for Fate himself. The other half was for me.

I wanted him to be my courage time and again, as he had ever since we met.

In this way, Fate became a servant of the Hart family manor, and I could see out my duties as the holy knight Roxy Hart. It was a time of great joy for me as we snuck into the kingdom's town for an inspection and visited the Hart estate together.

But those days, and those times, were at an end. Fate had given me a surplus of courage, and I knew I would carry it with me, in my heart, to Galia.

I gripped the pendant made from the blue jewel Fate had bought me. "It'll be okay," I whispered.

The gates of the Military District opened at my arrival. Within, an army awaited my orders, prepared for our expedition to Galia.

“I can do this. I know I can do this. So please, Fate...wait for me.”

It was up to me now to be the holy knight he expected me to be.

## Afterword

**H**ELLO, I'm Isshiki Ichika.

This novel is a revised edition of the story originally uploaded on the webnovel website *Let's Be Novelists!* Since I started writing this novel, it's taken me about two years to get to this point. On the website, I'm perhaps something of a late bloomer.

When I write a novel, I always set one goal. This is a goal for only me as the writer and isn't related to the story itself. This time, the goal was to see whether I could write a story that kept on growing. As readers of Volume 1 know, our hero steals the stats and skills of his enemies by way of his Gluttony skill. He's the very definition of a main character who continues to grow. As the book's author, there's no better material to work with.

In the second volume, I intend to continue telling the story of Fate, his growth, and his encounters as he sets out from the kingdom. I hope I can do a good job of expressing the story of Fate as he gets ever stronger while reckoning with the Gluttony skill.

The first volume took quite some time to get published, but my editor told me we'll be able to publish the second volume sooner. I hope you'll pick up a copy when it comes out.

Finally, my thanks go to Fame for drawing wonderful illustrations on limited time. A lot of outside factors worked together to get us this far, so I also want to say thank you to my editor for their patience and flexibility in seeing this book to publication.

And, of course, my thanks go out to all the readers who have supported me since I started writing and publishing this story online. Without your support, I don't think I could have made it to this point. From the bottom of my heart, thank you!

I look forward to seeing you all again in the second volume!

# **Creator Profiles**

## **STORY**

ISSHIKI ICHIKA

I'm an ordinary businessman currently living in Okayama Prefecture. My daily habit is running after work, but recently, I've been so busy I haven't had the chance. These days, every time I step on the scale, I feel my lack of exercise.

## **ILLUSTRATIONS**

### **FAME**

Nice to meet you. This is my first time working on a light novel, and I enjoyed it. I'm cheering for Lady Roxy!



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